OVERFLOWING MAGAZINE!

COMICS • GRAPHIC NOVELS • MOVIES • TV • GAMES

COMIC HEROES

The Bad Girls Issue

CATWOMAN

HEADS UP THE SEXIEST, SLINKIEST, SINNINGEST* SIRENS IN COMICS

PLUS!
MEET HER LATEST BIG-SCREEN INCARNATION IN THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

"We're not bad, we're just drawn that way"
MODESTY!
ELEKTRA!
EMMA!
SONJA!
NATASHA!
They're the ultimate four-colour femme fatales

NEW!
INCREDIBLE INTERVIEW SECTION
- Grant Morrison
- Joe Quesada
- Gail Simone

Loads more

PLUS! PUNISHER • BANE • JOHN BYRNE • SILVER SURFER
GREG RUCKA • SECRET WARS • BATMAN'S GREATEST TEAM-UPS
AVENGERS VS X-MEN • AND THE NEW 52: THE SECOND WAVE

*(Is this even a word? - Ed)

FROM THE MAKERS OF SFX MAGAZINE

COMIC HEROES

Future Publishing Ltd: 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Email: comicheroes@futurenet.com
Web: www.comicheroesmagazine.com

EDITORIAL
Editor: Matt Bielby
matt.bielby@futurenet.com
Art Editor: Mark Mitchell
mark.mitchell@futurenet.com
Production Editor: Andrea Ball
andrea.ball@futurenet.com
Editorial Assistant: Rob Power
rob.power@futurenet.com
SFX Editor-in-Chief: Dave Bradley
david.bradley@futurenet.com
SFX Art Editor: Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTORS
Paul Gravett, James Hunt, Stephen Jewell, James Lovegrove, James McLaughlin, Joel Meadows, Mike Perkins, Holly Rose

ADDITIONAL LAYOUT
Mark Critchell, Catherine Kirkpatrick

Catwoman wallet image © DC Comics

Matt would like to thank: All comics that stick to a $2.99 price point, all comics that give more than the standard 20 or so pages per issue, and all comics that take longer than 10 minutes to read. Also, every character with a bit of meat to them (psychologically speaking). They don't have to be physically chunky, though that's fine too), and finally, all the comic book pros who helped us out this issue – you know who you are, and we couldn't have done it without you.

ADVERTISING
Advertising Manager: Adrian Hill
01225 442244, adrian.hill@futurenet.com
Advertising Sales Director: Rob Elms
020 7042 4131, rob.elms@futurenet.com
Digital Ad Manager: Andrew Church
020 7042 4237, andrew.church@futurenet.com

MARKETING AND SUBSCRIPTIONS
Group Marketing Manager Entertainment: Sam Wight
sam.wight@futurenet.com
Marketing Executive Entertainment: Tilly Michell
tilly.michell@futurenet.com
Direct Marketing: Kelly Robinson
kelly.robinson@futurenet.com

CIRCULATION AND LICENSING
Trade Marketing Manager: Jonathan Besson
jonathan.besson@futurenet.com
International Licensing Director: Matthew Ringer-Pescock
+44(0)1225 732345, matthew.ringer@futurenet.com
Licensing And Syndication Director: Regina Erak
regina.erak@futurenet.com
Head of Circulation: James Whitaker
james.whitaker@futurenet.com

PRINT AND PRODUCTION
Production Controller: Keely Miller
Print Manager: Rose Griffiths
Paper Controller: Lorraine Rees
lorraine.rees@futurenet.com
Advertising Production Coordinator: Alaina Henderson
alaina.henderson@futurenet.com

THE DESIGN PARTNERS
Creative Director: Rob Abbott
Editorial Director: Jim Douglas
Publisher: Lee Nutter
Publishing Director Games & Film: Simon Maxwell

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Phone our UK hotline on: 0870 837 4722
Subscribe online at: www.ifm.co.uk/subscribe

NEXT COMIC HEROES ON SALE 24 August 2012

MAGAZINE PRINTED IN THE UK BY William Gibbons on behalf of Future

DISTRIBUTED IN THE UK BY Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London EC1A 9PT Tel: 020 7429 4000
OVERSEAS DISTRIBUTION BY Future Publishing Ltd, Bath Tel: +44 (0)1225 442244

Brought to you by: The power of constant inspiration and excitement from two geniuses of the funny book field – Jack Davis, one of the founding cartoonists for *Mad* magazine, and Wally Wood, who did the same for *Witzend* as he was TV Guide cartoon covers, and Flash Gordon's Alex Raymond, with his heavy feathering, high adventure and (surely inadvertent?) homoeroticism. We salute you both! Plus: Earl Grey tea.

Future
www.futurenet.com

Future produces carefully targeted magazines, websites and events for people with a passion. Our portfolio includes more than 150 magazines, websites and events and we export or license our publications to 90 countries around the world.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).

Chief Executive Mark Wood
Non-executive Chairman Peter Allen
Group Finance Director Graham Harding
Tel: +44 (0)207 042 4000 (London)
Tel: +44 (0)1225 442 244 (Bath)

© Future Publishing Limited 2012. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced without the written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited is a company registered in England & Wales (company number 2008885) with its registered office at Beauford Court, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW. All information contained in this magazine is for information purposes only, and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. Readers are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in the magazine. Prices and availability may vary from those shown. We cannot be held responsible for any products or services advertised or mentioned in this issue, including but not limited to mail order offers and classified ads. Inclusion of any material in this magazine, including but not limited to editorial opinion, does not imply endorsement by Future. Any material you submit is sent on the understanding that it is not subject to any obligation of confidence, and that Future and its employees, agents and assigns are entitled to use it in any form and for any purpose whatsoever. Future and its employees do not accept responsibility for any unsolicited material lost or damaged in the post or otherwise. Future and its employees have used reasonable endeavours to ensure that the content of this magazine is accurate, but we cannot be held responsible for any errors or omissions.

FSC www.fsc.org MIX Paper from responsible sources FSC® C007184

recycle
When you have finished with this magazine please recycle it.

Facebook.com/ComicHeroes

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from well managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. Future Publishing and its paper suppliers have been independently certified in accordance with the rules of the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council).

"Actually, geeks persuasion skills are the most useful thing you'll ever learn."

Editor's intro Welcome!

ALL CHANGE!

This is a big time for superheroes: a new Peter Parker in a new *Spider-Man* film; the stunning Christopher Nolan *Batman* sequence reaching its conclusion in *The Dark Knight Rises*; DC's complete reinvention of its mainstream comics line now reaching its 'Second Wave'; what's generally considered to be the greatest single superhero tale of all time earning a controversial, never-saw-that-coming prequel; and over at Marvel, superheroes fighting other superheroes. (It's nice to know there are *some* things you can rely on.)

Of course, *Comic Heroes* has never been just about the men in tights: it's a celebration of everything the medium is, and can be; this issue's look at the work of Frederik Peeters, 'Best Book' nominee at Angoulême for autobiography *Blue Pills*, is proof positive of that.

'Heroes' can be the creators too, of course, hence our introduction of a new section this issue: Shapers of Worlds, a home for short, snappy interviews with big-name writers and artists. We hope you enjoy it.

Also new this issue: me! This is not the first magazine I've ever edited, but it promises to be a particularly fun one. Jes Bickham, who's manfully shepherded *Comic Heroes* since #1, has been kidnapped by dwarves, or something, and left me with a pile of graphic novels to read and even bigger boots to fill.

Expect a few changes – no major surgery, just little tweaks – in the issues to come. To paraphrase a well-known comic: "It's a strange magazine. Let's keep it that way."

Matt Bielby,
Editor

MEET THE TEAM

Comic Heroes has only six soldiers, but they've all got their favourite 'Bad Girl'...

JAMES LOVEGROVE

Satana, the Devil's Daughter, in the '70s Marvel horror mags: wide-hipped and haughty, with cutaway body-stocking and furry boots. Yes, she'll leave you an empty husk when she's done with you. But it'd be worth it.

HOLLY ROSE

I love Monet 'M' St Croix of X-Factor investigations: she'll get in your face, take you down a whole cutaway body-stocking and furry boots. Yes, she'll leave you an empty husk when she's done with you. But it'd be worth it.

ROB POWER

She's not bad exactly, but she is, undoubtedly, bad-ass: Helo Jones. She crossed the galaxy, spent time at the bottom of a bottle, fought in a heavy-gravity war, killed a General, stole a ship and then deserted. What a woman.

PAUL GRAVETT

Minnie the Minx was Britain's prototype anarcho-feminist in her black-and-red stripey jumper. Her creator, Leo Baxendale, said she was less a female Dennis the Menace, more 'an Amazonian warrior'.

STEPHEN JEWELL

You don't get much more wicked than villain-turned-hero (we think!) Emma Frost – and what a pity that the rumour about Rosemund Pike playing her in *X-Men: First Class* didn't turn out to be true.

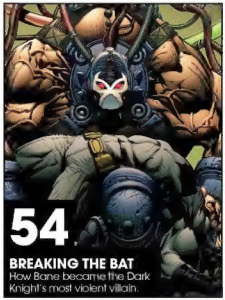
MATT BIELBY

Maddie Pryor, Jean Grey's chippy clone, particularly in her first appearances as a suspiciously perfect Jean lookalike – who, at the time, really was an innocent struggling to make a place for herself in someone else's shadow.

CONTENTS

FROM SFX COMIC HEROES SUMMER 2012

36
COVER FEATURE
We're not all bad, but we're sure drawn that way.



54
BREAKING THE BAT
How Bane became the Dark Knight's most violent villain.

68
JOHN BYRNE
Runts with claws, green girls skipping, and alas, poor Jean...

NEWS

6 HEAT VISION
Gay weddings, unexpected outings, and previews of all the new books. Plus: **Len Wein**, **Geoff Johns**, our Kapow! Con report, and why *Amazing Spider-Man* can't afford to get Gwen wrong!

INTERVIEWS

20 SHAPERS OF WORLDS
New interview section! **Georges Jeanty**, **Grant Morrison**, **Joe Quesada**, **Darick Robertson**, **Gail Simone**, **Si Spurrier**, **Chris Burnham** and more...

FEATURES

36 BAD GIRLS
From Elektra to Harley Quinn, we celebrate 30 of the sauciest, snarkiest, sneakiest ladies in comics.

48 CATWOMAN
This cat's got claws: how Selina Kyle defined the kinda good/kinda bad comic book anti-heroine.

52 THE DARK KNIGHT RISES
It's the last time out for the current run of Bat-flicks, and they're pulling out all the stops!

54 BEING BANE
The brainy bruiser has to make us forget *The Dark Knight's* Joker; we assess his chances.

57 BATMAN'S FINEST TEAM-UPS
For a loner, the Dark Knight has a lot of friends...

62 BEFORE WATCHMEN
Controversial? Just a bit! We go inside the new DC line that's got *everyone* talking...

66 NACHO VIGALONDO
The man bringing *Supercrooks* to the big screen.

68 BLUFFER'S GUIDE: JOHN BYRNE
He's the mouthiest genius in comics! We assess the life and work of Mr Diplomacy.

72 HIDDEN GEMS
Lee & **Buscema**'s amazing, disastrous *Silver Surfer.*

74 GREG RUCKA
Crime and punishment, in capes and civvies both.

80 INSIDE IMAGE
Publisher **Eric Stephenson** on the new spirit at Image Comics – and its amazing new books.

82 SECRET ORIGINS
Walt Simonson on Thor, Modesty and more.

86 JUDGE JAMES
In the dock: *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars.*

88 THE ART OF MATT WAGNER
From *Mage* to *Grendel*, he's one of our most gifted storytellers – and distinctive artists.

96 WORLD OF COMICS
Frederik Peeters: Swiss master of emotion.

REVIEWS

101 NEW COMICS & MORE
The latest floppies and graphic novels reviewed!

72 THE SILVER SURFER
Poetry in motion with Norrin Radd, perhaps the biggest moaner in comics.

82 WALT SIMONSON
Thor croaks! (No, not like that...) Asgard's greatest artist explains himself.

88 MATT WAGNER
Making the bad guy the protagonist ain't new, but few rock it like Wagner.

HEAT VISION

THE HOTTEST NEWS FOR ALL THINGS COMICS!

Astonishing X-Nuptials!

The big event takes place in #51.

Northstar says 'I do' and the X-Men's glamorous outsider status is maintained; we go inside the wedding of the season with creators Marjorie Liu and Mike Perkins. **By Stephen Jewell**

Everybody loves a wedding, and comic book fans are no exception. Ever since Reed Richards and Sue Storm famously walked up the aisle in 1965's *Fantastic Four Annual* #3, numerous superheroes have tied the knot in memorable on-page ceremonies, providing a welcome respite from the incessant apocalyptic battles.

It's fair to say, however, that few have attracted quite as many headlines as the upcoming nuptials between mutant speedster Northstar – a John Byrne creation for the Canadian team Alpha Flight, lately knocking around with the X-Men – and his non-mutant boyfriend Kyle Jinadu.

The central event of *Astonishing X-Men* #51, it follows in a number of rich comic book traditions: the 'Big Day' story, the X-Men-as-groundbreaking-outsiders tale, and the whole Marvel-Comics-reflect-the-real-world thing.

Written by erstwhile *X-23* scribe Marjorie Liu, and drawn by *Comic Heroes* columnist Mike Perkins, this not-long-ago-unthinkable same-sex union has had an overwhelmingly positive reception, in most quarters, at least.

"People love their superheroes, whether or not they read comics, and when those heroes make choices that reflect our real lives, it's bound to draw attention," Liu offers, when asked to explain this storyline's appeal. "Hopefully, it will inspire people to have the courage to make their own, sometimes hard, life choices."

And Perkins agrees: "It's always advantageous to have a response to any project you're involved in, as it indicates that people are taking notice. We were always aware that this arc would be divisive, but it seems to have been predominantly accepted as an interesting, important and brave step."

MUTANT MATRIMONY

With the Marvel's 'merry mutants' depicted as perennial fringe-dwellers since Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's '60s heyday, the X-line seems the perfect venue for such a historic occasion.

"That's important, because most people can identify with being an outsider, whether it's from society, a particular social group or even within your own family," says Liu. "To defy those feelings of exclusion and prejudice takes tremendous strength and inspiration, which is why the X-Men have remained so popular."

"The X-books have always been comics where creators can tackle those kinds of problems," adds Perkins. "They're also the kind of books that can portray the joy and redemption inherent in a character surpassing the expectations of those around them."

Despite inadvertently coinciding with DC's announcement that Golden Age Green Lantern Alan Scott would be reintroduced to the New 52 with a new orientation – yes, he too is now gay – Liu and Perkins insist that the Northstar wedding is no political statement or headline-grabbing stunt.

"Northstar and Kyle have been in a relationship for quite some time," says Liu. "And, as with most couples, a discussion of marriage eventually comes up, and is either acted upon or set aside."

"It was important for this to be an organic part of the growth of their already established relationship," adds Perkins. "It's not something we've created just for the press coverage."

Still, as Liu acknowledges, "no wedding ever goes entirely smoothly," so don't be surprised if the Marauders – who have been targeting the *Astonishing X-Men* cast since she and Perkins joined the book with March's #47 – gatecrash the party.

"That storyline is only the starting point for where we're leading our characters," teases Perkins. "It's a twisting, explosive path that they've been set upon!"

FAST COMPANY

The twin brother of personality-greedy fellow-speedster Aurora (imagine Northstar with long hair

The French-Canadian is a former pro skier.

WOW. YOU'RE ACTING SO CALM ABOUT THIS.
WHEN I FIRST REALIZED I WAS GAY, I WAS SCARED TO DEATH.
I'VE ACCEPTED MY SEXUALITY. I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT IT ANYMORE.

Northstar goes down on bended knee.

> **It's a twisting, explosive path that they've been set upon**

and curves), Jean-Paul Beaubier was first created – along with the rest of Canuk superteam Alpha Flight – as someone for the X-Men to fight, before guarded hints about his sexuality started to be dropped in his team's own '80s series.

After coming out of the closet in a painfully over-egged 1992 storyline, he's remained on the fringes of the X-world for some time, to many minds a Quicksilver-lite with only his sexuality to really distinguish him. These days, however, Northstar is finally starting to realise his full potential.

"I love him because he's a superhero who hides any pain he might feel beneath a gloss of celebrity and vanity," says Liu. "He lives a life that wholeheartedly celebrates who he is: a mutant *and* a gay man. And while his ego might really be super-sized, he would give up his life to help others."

"Like Quicksilver, his super-speed abilities can lead to a sense of impatience, and an arrogance with the world around him, but we're hoping that the momentum of our storylines keeps him suitably occupied," adds Perkins.

"I like depicting his particular sense of self-importance through his face and mannerisms and, above all, the use of his powers. Northstar is an interesting character to illustrate."

First introduced in 2009's *Uncanny X-Men* #508, Liu believes that marketing expert Kyle – despite his relatively short history – holds his own against his superhuman paramour.

"There are many different kinds of power between couples in relationships," she says. "Northstar might be able to fly and have super-strength, but he wouldn't be with Kyle if they weren't equals in other, more important ways. Kyle is way more stable and business-oriented, and far more of an anchor than Northstar could ever be. Sure, he can run fast – but he can't negotiate a multi-million-dollar advertising deal to save his life!"

Liu compares their romance to relationships between police officers and their civilian spouses. "One person is always going off into dangerous situations, and then there's the person left behind," she says. "That's just the way it is for Kyle, who can't help or protect the man he loves – and who is a target, simply for being close to Northstar. That's stressful, and it's bound to wear on him."

ROCKY ROAD

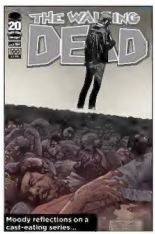
And, just as in real life, the pair will soon discover that marriage is merely the start of a long – and, no doubt, very rocky – road.

"Saying 'I do' certainly doesn't erase the problems or conflicts that already existed," says Liu. "Getting married is really just an act of faith – that this is the person who you want to spend the rest of your life with. Kyle and Northstar are going to do just that." **CH!**

*Check out current issues of **Astonishing X-Men** for ongoing wedding-based shenanigans.*

Surely this is all kinda of wrong?

Emma Frost gets mean (as we like her, natch).



Moody reflections on a cast-eating series...

National Comics: Eternity: kinda trendy.

Hawkeye goes mod - and makes purple *his* colour.

New Comics

Latest issues on sale soon, as corralled by **James Hunt**

Unsure which big releases to buy? Wish you knew in advance what titles will be on everyone's lips? Don't worry, help is at hand courtesy of *Comic Heroes'* regular look at the must-read releases that will be hitting comic shop shelves over the next two months...

MARVEL

Avengers Vs X-Men continues its dominance of Marvel's line in July and August, seeing the release of *Avengers Vs X-Men* #7-#10 as well as tie-ins in all *Avengers* series and numerous X-books. If you're after something a bit more digestible, then look instead to *Divided We Fall*, an *Ultimate* crossover that begins in July's *Ultimate Comics Ultimates* #13 & *Ultimate Comics X-Men* #14.

August is officially our favourite webhead's 50th anniversary, so there's celebration everywhere: Bendis and Pichelli's *Spider-Men* #3 & #4 continues the team-up of Miles Morales and Peter Parker, while *Avenging Spider-Man* #11 features a special team-up of its own, guest-starring... Aunt May?

In Spidey's flagship title, *Amazing Spider-Man* #692 begins the countdown to #700 with a 64-page special and, as if that wasn't enough, you can also find a selection of classic-era 'untold' stories in *Peter Parker Spider-Man* #156.1, *Sensational Spider-Man* #33.1 & #33.2 and *Web of Spider-Man* #129.1 & #129.2.

As for new launches, fans of Carol Danvers should pick up *Avenging Spider-Man* #9 & #10, which together debut the character's new identity, leading into July's *Captain Marvel* #1, by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Dexter Soy. Then, in August, there are two new ongoing series: *Hawkeye* #1, by the *Immortal Iron Fist* team of Fraction and Aja, and *Gambit* #1, by X-office mainstays James Asmus and Clay Mann.

If you're after some classic Marvel action, industry legend Alan Davis writes and draws a trio of interlinked annuals starting with *Fantastic Four Annual* #33, continuing through *Daredevil Annual* #1 and ending in *Wolverine Annual* #1. And if you want something completely new, then Frank Tieri takes Frank Castle to a new (final) frontier in the madcap-sounding *Space Punisher* #1. Finally, in the mutant corner of the Marvel U, X-fans should keep an eye on Neal Adams and Christos Gage's *The First X-Men* #1, while *Wolverine* #310 finally explains how Sabretooth returned from the dead.

DC

July and August finds much of the New 52 coasting along mid-storyline, but that doesn't mean nothing's happening at DC. The second and third wave of *Before Watchmen* titles bring us *Rorschach* #1, *Dr Manhattan* #1 and *Ozymandias* #1 by the likes of Brian Azzarello, J Michael Straczynski and Len Wein. Love it or loathe it, you can't really ignore it.

It isn't just *Watchmen* being brought back, either – *National Comics: Looker* #1 and *National Comics: Eternity* #1 revive old characters from DC's National Comics days, and with talent like Ian Edginton and Jeff Lemire on board, they're sure to be worth a look.

And by the power of Grayskull, James Robinson and Philip Tan give us *He-Man And The Masters Of The Universe* #1, a new miniseries based on the classic cartoon (not, mercifully, the less-than-classic movie).

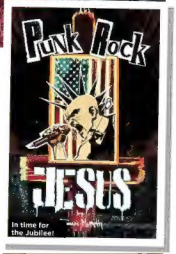
DCU fans should look out for *DC Universe Presents* #1, which features the first New 52 solo adventure for Kid Flash, and for *Phantom Lady* #1, start of a new miniseries by Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti. The first New 52 annuals also hit, including *Justice League International Annual* #1, *The Flash Annual* #1, *Superman Annual* #1, *Detective Comics Annual* #1 and *Green Lantern Annual* #1.

Vertigo fans get another chance to hop on board Paul Cornell and Ryan Kelly's new ongoing in August's standalone *Saucer Country* #6, featuring guest art by Jimmy Broxton, and there's also a

Walt Simonson's century-spanning *The Judas Coin*

Sick of vampires, eh? Looker says otherwise

Pop art stylishness, your name is Allred.



In time for the Jubilee!

INDIE SPOTLIGHT

Bucko

Written by Marvel's Jeff Parker and drawn by Erika Moen (star of the *DAR!* webcomic), *Bucko* is a slacker-comedy turned murder-mystery set in Portland which starts with Rich 'Bucko' Richardson waking up late for a job interview, and finding himself accused of a crime he hasn't committed. Featuring a cast of steampunks, mettheads, Juggalos and Suicide Girls, it's dirty and funny, dark in subject matter but lighthearted in execution. Available to order now, 136 pages, $19.99

> **"A clone of the son of God stars in his own reality show"**

new ongoing series from Joe the Barbarian's Sean Murphy; set in the near future, *Punk Rock Jesus* #1 sees a clone of the son of God starring in his own reality show called 'J2'. Buy it before it gets pulped! And finally, keeping with the biblical theme, Walt Simonson's *The Judas Coin* is a 96-page hardcover following one of Judas' 30 pieces of silver as it travels through DCU history.

INDEPENDENTS

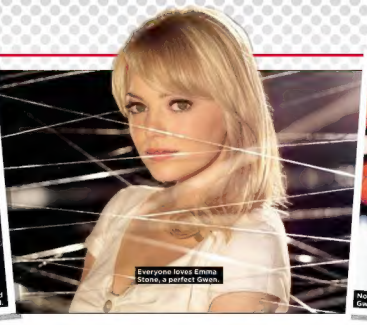
Robert Kirkman celebrates a true Image landmark in July when the release of *The Walking Dead* #100 marks a rare indie comics centenary. This 40-page issue promises the series' most brutal moments yet.

Similar post-apocalyptic fun can be found in both *Debris* #1, a new limited series about an Earth left to rot by humanity, and *Enormous* #1, a 64-page one-shot where giant beasts hunt humanity to extinction!

Those more interested in the lighter side could look for *Chew: Secret Agent Poyo* #1, a one-shot that spins-off the fan-favourite cybernetic kung-fu roaster into his own story, or *It Girl! & The Atomics* #1, a new series featuring characters from Mike Allred's *Madman*, full of silver age-style superheroics and craziness.

The only big launch from Marvel's creator-owned Icon range is *Powers: FBI* #1, in which Bendis and Oeming bring back their hit superhero cop series with a new status quo. Meanwhile, from Dark Horse, *Axe Cop: President Of The World* #1 sees the cult hero taking on his toughest assignment yet, while *Concrete: Three Uneasy Pieces* collects Paul Chadwick's shorts from Dark Horse Presents.

And finally, the Buffyverse expands yet again in August as *Buffy Season 9* spins off a new miniseries: *Spike* #1 by Victor Gischler and Paul Lee sees the famous punk vampire exploring the dark side of the moon – and we're not talking about an interest in prog rock! It's guaranteed to be one vampire comic that doesn't (oh, you know). **[41]**



Gwen Stacy: Hot Mess

The Gwen Stacy of popular imagining is a sappy beauty, but the original character was a far more fiery thing. Here's how *The Amazing Spider-Man* should treat her (and yes, that fella with the tail too)

Beyond the whole mystery-of-Peter's-parents thing, *The Amazing Spider-Man* differs most from the Sam Raimi flicks in the characters it's putting front-and-centre: the Lizard, a Spider-villain of the old school, and Gwen Stacy, Pete's first love.

Though the Lizard is a decent baddie, it's how they handle Gwen that will be the measure of the film. Here's what we're hoping for from *both* co-stars...

"She looks like Veronica Lake and plays men perfectly"

1. WE WANT: HOITY GWEN!

All Steve Ditko stories were intricate beasts, emotional soap opera scenes woven around the action constantly. Symbolism was everywhere, many of hoity-toity ice maiden Gwen's first speech bubbles – "thank you very much, Mister Parker" – literally dripping with icicles. Early Gwen was a complicated siren, her eyebrows ironically arched, her fascination with Peter never quite preventing her from joining in with his bullying.

2. WE WANT: LIZARD-BUNNY!

The Lizard, one of Lee's many variations on the Jekyll-Hyde theme, was essentially Spider-Man gone wrong. Whereas lucky Peter got to hold onto his humanity following his arachnid accident, Curtis Connors lost his thanks to a Faustian pact with capricious nature; normally a friendly chap with a loving wife and son, his obsession with a single flaw – his missing right arm – saw him develop a serum designed to replicate a lizard's ability to regrow lost limbs. Hey, it worked on a rabbit! (Sadly, *Amazing* #6 doesn't show us nice Curt chopping a live bunny's leg off to allow for this test run.)

The inevitable happens and Curt gets more than he bargained for: cue racing out into the night, menacing small boys (a sequence with this ugly, flasher Mac-sporting monster lurching out towards a screaming child even includes snake symbolism: it's a *Daily Mail* leader in picture form!), and the debut of one mean-spirited croc-that-walked-like-a-man.

3. WE WANT: NOIR GWEN!

Gwen was by no means Peter's first girlfriend. Still at school, he'd dated Betty Brant, secretary of JJJ – likely a good five years older than him – while dizzy Liz Allen provided the schoolgirl alternative. It wasn't until #31, with Peter and bully Flash Thompson now enrolled at Empire State University, that the love action hots up. A new cast appears, notably 'ex-beauty queen of Standard High' Gwen. She looks like Veronica Lake and plays men perfectly: Gwen knows all about Flash's football career, and Pete's science scholarship, and massages both egos with casual aplomb.

4. WE WANT: TOUGH GWEN!

Gwen's naysayers point to her later appearances – the final, settled version of the character of the last Lee/Romita issues and into later runs – as proof that she was always a damp squib, the perfect girlfriend with nowhere interesting to go. And it's true that she eventually fell into a rut: worrying about Peter, fretting about her retired police captain dad, occasionally running off in some emotional tizzy. At the time we loved that girl, but with hindsight we're happy to forget her: the earlier model was *way* more complex and conflicted, this haughty vixen in reds and blacks, brazen in her pursuit of Peter – the only boy who didn't pant and fawn in her presence – and infuriated by his apparent lack of interest. "Nobody gives Gwen Stacy the brush off that way," she thinks. "You, young man, are going to regret that, I promise!"

5. WE WANT: DEVIL HORNS!

Gwen's look developed in the most interesting ways: first she was the film noir siren, something engagingly wicked in her college campus smoulder; then the happy good-time girl, Mary Jane's friendly rival in the knock-the-boy's-socks-off-stakes (around #47 these two were truly Spidey's answer to *Archie*'s Betty and Veronica). Finally, the devoted daughter and teary-eyed girlfriend. You can gauge where you are with her by the way she rocks her blonde: in cascading waterfalls, perfect for fuming beneath; pinned away from her eyes so it looks like she's actually sporting tiny devil horns; finally, held by the classic black headband. (During a Vietnam-heavy tale in #107-109, she briefly changed it to a more hippy, flower-power style – it didn't stick.)

6. WE WANT: RIVALS!

Amazing #42 headlines John Jameson's first superpowered incarnation, but is more crucial in two other ways: first, Gwen has

Not Spidey's most dramatic moment!

Gwen smirks, her history all around her.

obviously been shopping, for the famous black Alice band makes its debut appearance; then, right at the end, we get our first ever sight of the much-talked-about Mary Jane Watson: "Face it, tiger, you just hit the jackpot!" Suddenly the pieces are in place, the battle lines drawn: MJ would be dizzy, exciting, fun, and Gwen (after a brave stab at competing) would grow insipid as the months rolled by. Gwen Stacy wasn't killed by loopy Norm on the Brooklyn (or George Washington) Bridge; her long, slow, lingering demise began here.

7. WE WANT: SAUCINESS!

How sexually aggressive was Gwen? The modern memory of her is of the perfect good girl, hence the recent(ish) furore over JMS' retro-fitted Norm Osborn tryst, but that's not what the early comics show. There's the famous panel of her stalking Peter, complaining that he's "the only boy I've met who hasn't given me a tumble!" (We suspect Lee didn't mean her to be quite the slut this implies, but remain baffled as to what he actually *did* mean.) Later she'd suggest taking Pete to see Swedish arthouse flick *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, in which a flaccid penis is kissed. (Peter looks petrified.)

8. WE WANT: ALLIGATORS!

The movie Lizard looks – from what we can tell – like a massive, Hulk-level monster, the Abomination's cousin. How different to Ditko's version, first seen in *Amazing* #6: a relatively skinny humanoid, hardly any bigger than a man, he retains his suit trousers, black t-shirt and white lab coat with no ripping apparent. He's strong, though: throwing a giant tree, shrugging off bullets, gathering an army of alligators to his side. The film would be punchier for their presence, we're convinced – while conceding that the gators would have to swim a long way from the Everglades...

9. WE WANT: DOCKLANDS!

Much of the fun of the Lizard comes not from his machinations – he's a pretty basic sort, his human-mind clouded, his motivations escape and destruction in roughly equal measure – but from his visual, and the moral quandary he puts Peter in: Spidey doesn't want to hurt Curt, but has to stop him before he harms his own wife and kids (it's like being pals with a wife-beating drunk). His most impressive early appearance was in #75-77, terrorising the docklands...

10. WE WANT: SUSSED GWEN!

Amazing #44, the Lizard's second appearance – by this time he's left Florida and is hiding out in the New York sewers, a bizarre reflection of the urban myth about baby alligators flushed down the loo – is decent enough, but the real treat here is Gwen and Mary Jane's first meeting: we're in the Silver Spoon coffee shop, Gwen offers to fill Peter in on the schoolwork he missed, but instead MJ drags him off to "a little spot where they've got the grooviest guitars in town". Gwen, naturally, is pretty pissed off – but she seems to smile at her own reaction. That's what made her amazing before the simpering set in: her mix of confidence and vulnerability, bookworm and party animal, free spirit and daddy's girl. Sardonic and sweet in equal measure, she's perhaps the smartest character in the strip, and certainly the most self-aware.

Emma Stone, it's over to you. [4]

***The Amazing Spider-Man* is in cinemas from 3 July.**

Batman Begins

Geoff Johns explains his new take on comics' darkest, most potent hero...

DC's series of *Earth One* original graphic novels has got off, you'd have to say, to something of a slow start; following *Superman: Earth One*, by J Michael Straczynski and Shane Davis, in late 2010, we've seen precisely... nothing. (It doesn't help that, though it sold well, many found the Superman book to be distinctly underwhelming too, a 'realistic' alternative universe take with a cooler, more angst-ridden Clark and dull alien villains.)

Still, JMS will be back with a second take on this version later in the year, and in the meantime we have *Batman: Earth One*, offering an alternative, more realistic origin story for DC's *other* biggest gun. Behind it is one of the company's most experienced creative teams – writer (and DC chief creative officer) Geoff Johns, and British artist Gary Frank.

Earth One will present a very different Batman to anything we're used to, with many of the supporting cast almost unrecognisable – including Alfred and some of Gotham's more prominent police officers. "It's set in its own continuity," Johns says. "A completely self-contained Batman universe."

Batman is one of the few major DC characters the writer has yet to have had an extended stint on, but he's long been a fan of the Caped Crusader...

COMIC HEROES: Like the rest of us, we imagine you've been fond of Batman ever since childhood...?

GEOFF JOHNS: Yes, I used to have a ton of Batman toys and t-shirts. The first Batman comic that I can remember getting was a Killer Croc issue, and that really captured my imagination – all these crazy villains that he had! It was just a really interesting world, and I got sucked right into it. But it was really with Tim Burton's first film, in 1989, that I saw Batman in a different way and got really interested in him.

CH: You're working with Gary Frank, who you've collaborated with before, most recently on the *Superman* titles...

GJ: *Earth One* has been years in the making. We first discussed it about four years ago and Gary and I started working on it about two years back. It's the first original graphic novel that we've done together and the sheer size of it was a challenge – the script itself was 187 pages long and Gary has drawn about 140 pages. It's the biggest project I've ever worked on. But having a bit more space was a luxury, as you don't have to play catch-up every 20-something pages, because it's all in one book. We were able to let both the action and the character moments breathe.

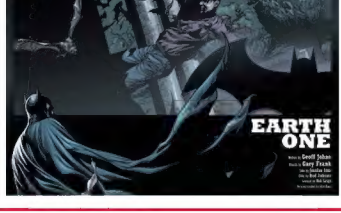
CH: JMS has his sequel to *Superman: Earth One* and we gather you'll be doing likewise...?

GJ: We already have a story, and the first volume actually hints at what the second one will be about. But it depends on our schedules; it just takes time to do this, as we really want to make sure that it's of the highest quality.

CH: You're both introducing Captain Marvel to the New 52 in *JLA*'s regular *Shazam* strip...

GJ: We could write and draw Billy Batson's kids all day! Gary is the only guy who could pull that off because he does such great emotion. Billy, and everyone else in the strip, are just so atypical for a comic book." [CH]

***Batman: Earth One** hits this universe on 10 July.*



"Batman really captured my imagination – all those crazy villains he had!"

A MUG'S LIFE

In the face of impending disaster, **Rob Power** learned all about creating comics under pressure...

Deadlines are the devil! Sure, from a distance they look innocent enough, especially when they're on a whole different page of your diary, but up close? They're nothing but ugly, panic-inducing things, sent from the very bowels of Hades to fill your head with stress, and your heart with sheer terror.

At least, that's how I felt shortly before my first webcomic was due to go online. My artist, John Cullen, and I had hit a disastrous snag (see page 11, *Comic Heroes* 12), and we were at crisis point. We had two weeks' worth of pages in the bag, but after some extended hand-wringing and frantic email exchanges, we'd decided to scrap them and start over.

The prospect of having to *completely* rewrite before we'd even properly started was like a punch in the gut. Time was tight, and with a handful of days to go, meltdown was imminent. But we set to work.

In the event, what happened wasn't simply a rewrite, but rather a repositioning of the whole concept. My confidence, previously flying high, came crashing down around me. I was consumed by the feeling that my story plans were too weird, too unwieldy for a weekly webcomic. Never one for half measures, I scrapped the lot. Instead of a narrative to be delivered in weekly chunks, I settled on the idea of creating a topical weekly gag strip, commenting on sci-fi-oriented developments out there in the real world.

In the event, it worked. Well, sort of. In order to buy us some time, I wrote a first page that introduced the comic and the idea that a cup of sentient mould could in fact be a central character. To his eternal credit, John produced the finished page to my script in record time, and before we knew it, the moment for online publication had arrived.

I'm not entirely sure what reaction I was expecting to that first page. International acclaim? Fortune and glory? Free pies? As I sat there waiting for it to go live, I pondered my impending ascent to greatness, until suddenly it was right there on the *SFX* homepage. Success! I'd made a webcomic!

Usually a reluctant social networker, descended upon Facebook and Twitter to hawk my wares to the masses. Slowly, a trickle of comments arrived underneath my masterpiece. Predominantly positive, it looked as if our heart-bursting last minute changes had worked: the *SFX* faithful seemingly giving it a tentative thumbs-up.

And then, within a couple of hours, it was over. The comments stopped, the hits dried up, and that was that: the fruits of months of work reduced to just another piece of internet detritus. This was not the glorious reception I'd envisaged. There was clearly much, *much* more work to be done. [FIN]

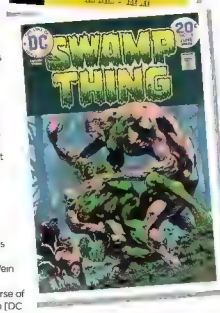
NEXT TIME: Weekly woes, the art of funny and finding a groove. In the meantime, you can read Rob and John's comic online at http://bit.ly/muggedoff

Lack of sleep can do strange things to a comic strip writer...

"I was consumed by the feeling that my story plans were too weird and unwieldy"

Smart Moves

Stephen Jewell meets Len Wein, *Watchmen*'s original editor and the man shaping the past of that old clever-clogs, Adrian 'Ozymandias' Veidt...



Len Wein – veteran co-creator of Wolverine and Swamp Thing, amongst others – is unique amongst the numerous *Before Watchmen* talents in that he worked on the original book: as *Watchmen*'s editor, back in 1986, he helped shape and clarify Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' historic opus, and now, decades later, he's been tasked with charting Ozymandias' backstory for the new, controversial set of prequels.

Proactive sort that he is, Adrian Veidt's tale predictably forms the spine of the interweaving story that connects *Before Watchmen*'s seven limited series.

"In many ways, everything that happens over the course of *Watchmen* happens because of Ozzy," Wein says. "It's been really exciting to tell the whys and wherefores of why he chose to do the things he did."

Illustrated by Jae Lee, July's six-parter shines a light on the motives behind Adrian Veidt's Machiavellian manoeuvres, a vastly ambitious plan that others first start to notice in *Watchmen* #1 with the long drop taken by the Comedian.

"The last panel in my last issue is the first panel in which you see him in *Watchmen*," reveals Wein, who admits that his story is best read with the knowledge of what unfolds in Moore's original tale. "That plays into what I'm doing, as I'm pointing out a few things that are actually already there, but aren't noticeable at first."

SAVE THE WORLD

According to Wein, depicting events from the perspective of a hyper-intelligent genius adds some interesting insights to the narrative.

"Being the World's Smartest Man has its own limitations, and I play with that a little bit. He is, in his own way, a very amoral – *not* immoral – character. There's a famous panel at the beginning of *Watchmen* #2 when the meeting of the Crimebusters fails apart, and poor Captain Metropolis tries to call them back saying, 'You can't leave, somebody has to save the world.' If you look at that panel, the only person still sitting is Ozzy."

While he's taking a lead from Moore's original, Wein is not emulating the Northampton mage's distinctive storytelling structures. "I'm writing it in the way that I'd normally write," he says.

Following the first major meeting between the assorted *Before Watchmen* talents at DC's offices last November, Wein has communicated regularly with his fellow scribes.

"DC had set aside two days for us to work everything out," Wein says, "but we had it all finished by lunch on the first day. Since then we've talked about continuity issues, and I've sent out questions as I've been writing."

According to Wein, the various characters cross over into each others' books to a lesser or greater extent, depending on their very specific relationships.

"There's a big fight in the second issue between Ozzy and the Comedian," he says, alluding to a scrap that was mentioned in *Watchmen* but never seen. "The other characters pop up in many of the books in that way."

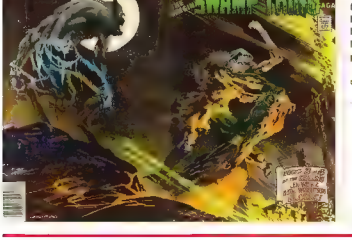
ORIGINAL PIRATE MATERIAL

Emulating *Watchmen*'s 'Tales of the Black Freighter' comics-within-the-comic, Wein is also penning a similarly pirate-themed strip, 'The Curse of the Crimson Corsair'. "When [DC co-publisher] Dan DiDio first offered me that particular gig, he suggested I do another 'Tales of the Black Freighter', but I said, 'Hell, no: we've already done that, so let's do a different one.'

"The whole idea is that, because superheroes were real in that world superhero comics faded very quickly and were replaced by pirate comics. So I thought to myself that, if this was actually an old DC comic from the '60s, there should be a house ad in it for the other titles. I had insomnia one night recently, so I came up with an entire line of DC pirate comics at 3am!"

Drawn by former *Watchmen* colourist John Higgins, 'The Curse of the Crimson Corsair' will run in two-page instalments in each of the individual titles before concluding with a special 10-page finale in the *Before Watchmen* epilogue one-shot.

"It never crossed my mind, when I first set out to write it, that I was going to confront myself with 35 separate cliffhangers," Wein laughs. "I had a hard time making that work! They aren't all matters of life and death, but every week it ends with an, 'Okay, now what?'" **[4I]**



*The **Before Watchmen** comics are on sale now, and examined in detail on page 62*

"In many ways, everything that happens, happens because of Ozzy"

THE VIEW FROM A BOARD

Mike Perkins has a favourite character he can't wait to get his hands on...

One of the questions I'm most often asked by fans is, 'Given the chance, what Marvel character would you most love to illustrate?' It's not easy to answer. There are so many factors that go into making these sorts of decision – at a corporate level, a business level, a collaborative level and, of course, at a fanboy level as well. (Believe me, we're *all* still fanboys, and there are specific characters each and every one of us has a desperate, sometimes secret, desire to tackle.) Let's have a look at those factors in more detail...

THE CORPORATE (Or: will this character sell comics?) **Sometimes how much we want to draw certain characters doesn't impact on whether we do so or not at all. No matter how much love we may have for Deathlok, Longshot, or any number of the original New Mutants – acting on their own, or even as part of a Spellbinders reunion – hard-nosed business considerations matter. That's not to say a less-celebrated character can't be shined up and made to glow enough to become a minor sales smash (Huston and Finch did it with Moon Knight, after all), but in this day and age it's often best to play it safe and go with the tried and tested.**

THE BUSINESS (Or: are we getting our money's worth?) **It's a double-edged sword, this: the more popular you get and the more the comics companies start to admire your talent and skill, the more your page rate increases. Fabulous news, of course, except you've just priced yourself out of ever drawing those B and C-list characters you'd been dying to work on. I'd dearly love to collaborate with Christos Gage on another Union Jack series, but – luckily or unluckily, depending on how you look at it – our cachets have both increased sufficiently since we last worked together on the character (what, six or so years ago?) that Marvel probably wouldn't be willing to accommodate the budget needed to give him another go.**

Hulk and Cap A are on Perkins' radar.

Bucky as the Winter Soldier.

Black Bolt and Medusa rocking.

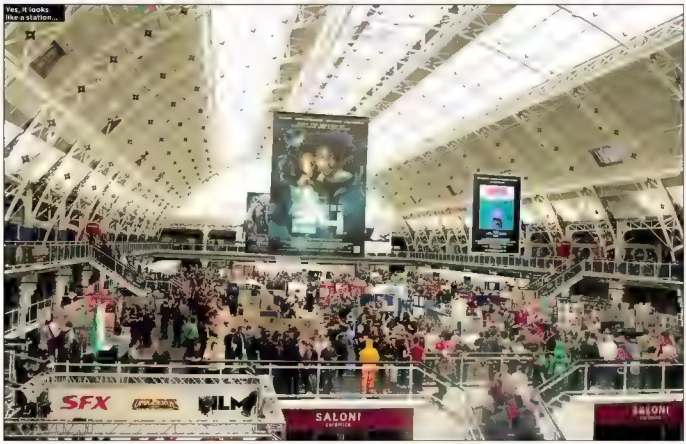
THE COLLABORATIVE (Or: I'd love to work with you) **There are a number of writers I'm desperate to team up with; writers who, when I read their stuff, connect me with the story in special ways, or simply astound me with their craft. Indeed, a lot of the time the writer I'll be collaborating with on an assignment is a far more important consideration than which characters or scenario we'd be working with – at least as far as making the basic, crucial decision to take on that venture.**

THE FANBOY (Or: so many toys, so little time) **Here's the big problem: there are just so many Marvel characters I'd love to illustrate that the mind boggles and I start to get worried about how little time I have left. Wolverine? Yes, please. Black Widow? Without hesitation. Mystique or Sub-Mariner? Elektra or the Inhumans? Give me a call anytime. Some seem like naturals for my style – The Punisher, Winter Soldier, just about anything involving Captain America – but others maybe less so. The Marvel U is overflowing with great characters. I'd love to try my hand at Hulk for instance, or – oh, yes please – Marvelman. But of course, when push comes to shove, the real answer is Daredevil. [RI]**

The Black Widow is another Marvel fave.

❝ There are just so many Marvel characters I'd love to illustrate that the mind boggles ❞

Mike Perkins is currently knocking it out of the park as artist on ***Astonishing X-Men****.*



Yes, it looks like a station...

Let's Do The Show Right Here!

Kapow! was always designed to be a British San Diego, where comics, films and games collide; it's not quite that yet but its slick second year finds it in rude health nonetheless, says **Paul Gravett**

Even before we arrived at London's Business Design Centre, Kapow! 2012 had already started: on the tube on the way there we overheard three attendees discussing the guests.

One asked who Charlie Adlard is; another mentioned not being on the guest list this year (Later we twigged that it was Angelo Tirotto, writer-creator of the rising British m nisenes from mage *No Place Like Home* Tirotto was planning to give away copies of his cleverly nornfic *Wizard Of Oz* rem x as his business card – let's hope he gets nvited next year)

From Inverness to Northampton, Cardiff to Exeter, UK Comic-Cons are thriving. Certain y, the current scene is a far cry from the early '80s, when there was usually on y one major highlight during the entire year - general y the UK Comic Art Convention (or UKCAC) in London, masterm nded by Frank Plowright and Hassan Yusuf (In addition you might have got a weekender in Birm ngham, organised perhaps by Ph l Clarke, and UKCAC's younger Glaswegian offspring, GLASCAC.)

> **"Britain seems to be hosting more comic events than ever"**

BUSY CALENDAR

What a contrast with today! Britain – and London especially – seems to be host ng more comic-related events than ever In February, London Super Com c Convention made its confident debut (see the report in *Comic Heroes* #12) and the Anglo-French festival BD & Comics Passion returned to the French Institute in London at the end of May Sandw ched in between, though, on 19-20 May, was a second outing for the Mark M lar-endorsed *Kapow!*, you can see how busy the scene has become when you consider that it was held only a week after both the Bristol Comics Expo – restored to its previous capacious venue – and the new CamCon in Cambridge, and one week ahead of the mu t media behemoth MCM Expo, at ExCeL n London's Dock ands.

Convention overload, maybe? Creators can get overstretched juggling dead nes while trying to attend too many gigs n a row. s grang and sketching non-stop for fans And in these belt-tightening times, most punters only have so

Dave Gibbons (with his favourite read!)

THE M
Cin's Matt Bielby plays at talk show host

Celeb fans Jimmy Carr and Frankie Boyle.

Rob Power and the mighty Joe Quesada

Masked grapplers entertain the crowds.

much cash for tickets, not to mention the travel and hotel costs for out-of-towners.

May's crowded schedule, and Kapow's price-hike for entry, may partly explain why attendances, estimated at 5,000 each day, appeared lower than in 2010.

Scar Comics publisher Shane Chebsey thought the buzz wasn't quite as intense as last year but figured that was due to a first show always being a little bit special.

"Our takings dropped by about 40 per cent," he said. "I put that down to a much higher fanboy presence than last year, when lots of people who'd never been to a Comic-Con came to see the TV and movie stars.

CELEBRITY WATCH

Famous faces weren't entirely absent this year, though, with lines stretching to the street for Nick Frost in particular. There were also a host of celebrity comic fans (and sometime creators) including Jonathan Ross, Jimmy Carr, Peter Serafinowicz and Frankie Boyle, film directors like Gareth Evans (*The Raid*), Gareth Edwards (*Monsters*, *Godzilla*) and Nacho Vigalondo (*Timecrimes*, *Supercrooks*); and a random but interesting selection of actors and other creative types, including Rufus Sewell, Russell Tovey, Noel Clarke, *Star Wars* producer Rick McCallum and, slightly randomly, the cast of the new *Bend It Like Beckham* for athletics, *Fast Girls*. Still, the Hollywood razzle-dazzle you get from the presence of a star like last year's Chris 'Thor' Hemsworth was notably absent.

Also missing was IGN's gaming presence near the entrance, replaced by a stage hosting an interview marathon – helmed by *Comic Heroes*' Matt Bielby and Rob Power plus others from the *SFX* and *Total Film* teams – and by the matt-slamming thuds of the Lucha Britannia wrestlers across the concourse. This act – a twist on Lucha Libre Mexican wrestling with an added bondage-themed cabaret act element – was much enjoyed by many, but really had

HEAT VISION

Dark City star Rufus Sewell.

A grumpy looking Peter Serafinowicz.

Mr Fantastic, and his amazing arms.

Mr. Millar and Civ's Adrian Hill on stage.

Cosplay frenzy: the FP rocked the show.

“Kapow! seems to attract a whole load of new people”

little connection to the world of comics, outside the masked outfits.

The key to Kapow!’s success is pulling in punters who may not be avid comic readers a ready – or exclusively – but who, once there, get to discover how vast and varied the bigger picture really is.

Ben Dickson, author of *Falling Sky*, thinks the best thing about Kapow! is that it brings in the London contingent who simply wouldn’t travel to a show in Birmingham, Bristol or Leeds.

“Those events are great,” he says, “but you do see a lot of the same faces, Kapow! seems to attract a whole load of new people.”

Among the Kapow! first-timers we chatted to were an ex-gaming company illustrator from South Africa keen to get into the portfolio reviews and break into comics, and Lee Stuart, a fan who’d given up on comics ages ago but was genuinely gobsmacked by the current scene.

Stuart was tailed all day by a crew from Liberation Frequency, who were filming a forthcoming documentary about comics. Director Denis-José Français said he hoped that Kapow! didn’t stray too far into other realms.

There are other cons that handle film and stuff,” he said. “What we need, and what I think Kapow! does best, is offer a dedicated Comic-Con for London.”

EASY ACCESS

The queuing system seemed to be an improvement on last year – perhaps because there were fewer people – and most visitors were able to see the panels and creators that they wanted to. (Although, we did hear that one VIP guest was refused admission because he’d forgotten his pass!)

Lots of people complained that the show closed too early on the Sunday – any chance of later hours next year? – but there was still plenty going on right up until the end, including the hilarious and spectacular Cosplay Competition on the *Comic Heroes* stage.

MAJOR LEAGUE

The American majors were represented by DC’s Dan DiDio, Marvel’s Joe Quesada and Image’s Eric Stephenson, plus big-name creators from Scott Snyder to Dave Gibbons, but there was also a significant – and very welcome – showing of British self-publishers, small presses and independents, many in the new Artists’ Alley along one side of the upstairs mezzanine floor. Once everybody discovered where it was, it proved really popular – although the limited light was blocked by some banners. There’s scope to expand this sector although high-profile cross-media brands and creators remain Kapow!’s core appeal.

Self Made Hero’s Doug Wallace said he’d love to see more time and space devoted to independent creators, but understood that this wasn’t the show’s focus.

“Sarah and Lucy Unwin [the show organisers – Millar is more of a front man] put on a tremendous weekend of entertainment,” he added.

And that’s one thing that can’t be denied. As North London’s boutique answer to the giant San Diego Comic-Con International, Kapow! is now indisputably a key fixture in the UK comics calendar. **CH**

*Go to **kapowcomicconvention.com** for news of next year’s Kapow!*

COSTUME DRAMA

What's it like to cosplay at a big show like Kapow!? Holly Rose, our very own Hawkeye, explains

The world of cosplay is a strange and wonderful one, full of sewing machine injuries, hot glue burns and ever-more insane and OTT ideas. What makes it all worthwhile is that putting on the outfit and 'becoming' a character you love is one of the best feelings. It's being treated like you're a superhero (or a villain); it's letting people take your picture; it's others appreciating all your hard work; it's expressing your love of comics (or cartoons, TV shows, whatever) by joining in and becoming part of them. For me, and all the other cosplayers I know, it makes the whole convention experience that little bit better.

I've been cosplaying for six years now – been to my share of cons, and seen the standard in the UK grow and grow – but nowhere was this more evident then at this year's Kapow! My weekend favourites had to be Reed Richards and his crazy, wobbly arms – it was clever, funny, and 'Reed' really played the part. The Thing and Loki were also superb, both in brilliantly-made costumes and in-character throughout – at one point I even had to stop Loki brainwashing me with his staff. I'm also going to have to mention the *amazing* Leah Okele's mysterious handmaiden from Kieron Gillen's *Journey Into Mystery*; I've never seen the costume done before and it was beautiful.

Though the most popular outfits at the con were Wonder Woman and Spider-Man (those old favourites), I was pleasantly surprised by how many unusual characters there were: Tank Girl and Winter Soldier Valkyrie and the Steph Brown version of Robin... It's not that I don't love Emma Frost and Batman but it's great to see something new.

I spent the weekend dressed as Kate Kid Loki or Hawkeye, the version from the Avengers film but with a few of my own tweaks to the colour scheme (I missed the original purple); there are two personal favourites from my wardrobe, along with Damian Wayne, the '90s leather-jacket-and-shades Superboy, Wiccan from *Young Avengers* and Nami.

If one thing put a slight downer on Kapow! as a cosplay experience, it was the competition at the end. It was great in itself – I love they way they organise it, with an awesome music track and everyone jumping on stage and posing – but, controversially, two little kids in store-bought costumes won the main prize. I, too, love to see children dressed up and take part – it's really cute – but it's a kick in the teeth for serious cosplayers. I certainly felt for the Thing, who had to settle for a 'runner-up' gong.

Practising their scariest faces...

Holly Rose as an awesome Hawkeye.

The Thing was a worthy runner-up...

Black Cat gets her five minutes of fame.

...losing out to two young comic fans.

SHAPERS OF WORLDS

Here come the girls

Gail Simone

She's bust open the superhero creator boy's club over the past decade or so, handling the biggest icons (Wonder Woman!) with aplomb, and – perhaps even more usefully – giving new life and meaning to a whole raft of DC's second stringers. But now, as the long-crippled Barbara Gordon walks again, Gail Simone is tackling perhaps the most controversial storyline of her career...

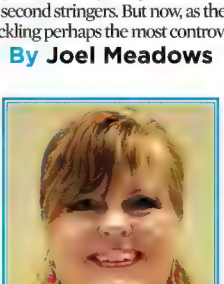
By Joel Meadows

There have usually been one or two female creators kicking around the superhero mainstream – Louise Simonson and Ann Nocenti spring to mind – but rarely enough of them to qualify as a genuine 'trend'. Could this be the decade when things finally change?

The signs are good, or goodish, Amanda Conner is as solid an artist of sunny superheroics as we've got, while DC has been particularly good (by industry standards, at least) at bringing on the girls, from Devin K Grayson to Jill Thompson and not just on the dark Vertigo titles either.

Top of the heap, however, must be Gail Simone, who's worked on everything from *Wonder Woman* to *Firestorm*, *The Atom* to [in a brief early dalliance with Marvel] *Deadpool*. She's best known, however, for taking street level female characters of modest superpower – second-tier creations, the uncharitable might say – and making them sing, notably in the long-running *Birds Of Prey*, which offered a rare all-girl superteam of minor Gotham City avenger types, led by Oracle (ex-Batgirl Barbara Gordon, now a wheelchair bound information broker) and with Huntress and Black Canary as her strong right arms.

With DC's The New 52 initiative – yet another reboot of the line's major characters – she's dropped *Birds* but retained Babs, now cured of her Joker-instigated spinal injuries and back on the crime-fighting frontline as Batgirl. It's been controversial, to say the least, but Simone – as we discovered when we caught up with her at Seattle's Emerald City Comic Con – retains her breezy, positive spin on things...



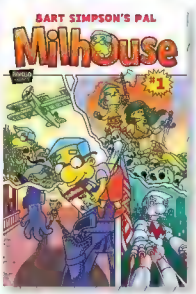
BORN OREGON, US
HIGH BIRDS OF PREY
NOW BATGIRL & FIRESTORM, DC
MORE www.unheardtaunts.com/wir

Comic Heroes: First you were a famous fan, then you got a gig writing *The Simpsons* comics for Bongo. As a woman in the industry, how out of place did you feel?

Gail Simone: I never let the fact that I was a female comic creator enter my mind, indeed, the only time I've ever thought about it was when other people brought it up. But now – and we're talking nine years later – I think it's finally become not so weird or unheard of for new female writers to come into the superhero genre. I'm expecting to see quite a few new female creators over the next few years; certainly, when I first started coming to conventions there were only a few female readers scattered here and there, and now they're a huge proportion of the people you see.

CH: You obviously love comics as a form, if not always what they do: many people know you for your snappy little satires of contemporary comics in an online column, or your infamous Women in Refrigerators website, where you bemoaned the violent fates of so many female characters.

GS: The thing is, we can do things in the sequential storytelling form that we can't really do in prose work, or in film either. Comics feel partway between the two for me. I like adventure stories, and I think the comic book lends itself very well to that; certainly, if you want to do some crazy futuristic thing, comics make it very easy – I get to write things that would cost $400 gazillion to film, which is sort of fantastic. We also, if we're lucky, get the most talented artists to draw our work. So it's



just a real thrill to be able to do this, to enjoy all the gorgeous artwork, and to be able to reach people emotionally too

CH: It's interesting how much you've embraced the superhero mainstream, considering how you began with such strong criticisms of it.

GS: I've been known to take a job just because it's something I've never done before. They'll ask me: 'How about doing a Superman/Pepsi tie-in?' And I'll go, 'I've never done that before. Sounds really tricky and hard – but okay!' Or, 'How about doing a graphic novel inspired by an Avril Lavigne song?'

Now I'm doing Barbara Gordon as Batgirl again, which is another new challenge – it's one of the few solo books I've done and I'm really enjoying delving more deeply into her character.

CH: Lots of voices haven't been happy about the new, magically 'fixed' Barbara though, have they? The New 52 reboot has – whatever else it's done – robbed superheroics of a rare wheelchair-bound role model, and a woman who lived through her wits as much as by high kicks and tight tops...

"I'm expecting to see quite a few new female creators over the next few years"

GS: I wrote Barbara Gordon as Oracle for five years in *Birds Of Prey*; I love her character, her intelligence and strength, and her absolute commitment to try to do good things in the world, whether that's from a wheelchair or not. Yes, she's regained ability in her legs – but I really wanted to make sure that we showed some realism in how we bring her out of the chair. I didn't want it to be just some comic book magic voodoo thing, but an important part of the storyline. Plus, I wanted to keep all the characteristics we love about her intact. I wanted the reader to be able to see into her thoughts, and get to know her by her actions and her behaviour, and by the way other people respond to her too.

CH: You've certainly enjoyed playing with the darker corners of the DCU...

GS: It's a blast, because I like getting into the psychology and motivations of a character, as well as their dialogue and actions. And it's really fun to be able to push the envelope, to do things that maybe haven't been seen before in a mainstream comic. When I was in theatre arts at high school and college, I always wanted to play the villain and I enjoyed it a lot. I guess that's just the dark side of me...

Below: Simone had a lengthy and impressive run on *Wonder Woman*

CH: We've noticed that you like to keep your hand in on the lighter side of the industry too, though...

GS: I've been following *The Simpsons* since their very first appearance on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, so to say I'm a fan is a bit of an understatement. Just the thought of writing a *Simpsons* comic, being able to put words into the Simpsons' mouths – it felt like I'd been dropped into some alternate reality when I got my first professional comic book job. I still write *Simpsons* stuff occasionally, and every time it makes me laugh – and makes me remember the fun part of comics too. [CI]

First Knight

Joe Quesada

Marvel's ex-head honcho has been pushed upstairs. Here he tells all on *Spider-Men*, that Avengers/X-Men thing, and the pressing question – what does he actually *do* all day?

By Stephen Jewell

Ever since he launched the Marvel Knights imprint – a home for street-level, crime-flavoured titles such as *Daredevil*, *Moon Knight*, *Black Panther* and *Wolverine* – in 1998, Joe Quesada has had a profound influence upon the House of Ideas. Its success saw him appointed editor-in-chief of the entire company in 2000, the now 50-year old having brought in edgier writing talents such as Brian Michael Bendis, Ed Brubaker and Matt Fraction for the Knights books – guys who have since become mainstream Marvel's chief architects.

When the 'Marvel Knights' badge [largely] disappeared in 2006, now being saved for high profile limited series, it wasn't that it was deemed a failure, more that it had won the fight – the entire line was now, effectively, 'Marvel Knights'.

Succeeded by Axel Alonso as EIC in 2001, Quesada now acts as Marvel's chief creative officer – more on what that means in a minute. Recently in London for his old pal Mark Millar's Kapow! convention, Quesada sat down with *Comic Heroes* for a chat over the proverbial 'cup o' Joe'

Comic Heroes: We like the sound of your new(ish) job, but what does it actually mean?

Joe Quesada: When I was EIC, my role was much more focused on publishing; as chief creative officer the role is similar, but it's a wider net that I cast. I'm responsible for overseeing a lot of different creative divisions at Marvel, from publishing to film, animation, videogames and television. But I can only focus so much on each division, and what determines that is the price of the ticket item – this being the case, the movies obviously need much more of my attention. It means I'm a little less involved in publishing than I'd like to be, but that's the nature of the beast. I'm the go-between linking the different divisions in a lot of ways. If I know that there's something cool happening in the movies or publishing, for example, I'll try and give everyone the heads-up.

CH: What are the first comics you remember and what appealed to you about them?

BORN NEW YORK CITY
HIGH DAREDEVIL
NOW MARVEL CHIEF CREATIVE
MORE marvel.com

"If the story isn't good then the readers won't come back"

JQ: I was a big Marvel fan growing up. My father bought me my first Marvel, but I then dropped comics aged about 12. I was reintroduced to them when I was 25, and actually started reading DC, because there was a real revolution going on there. It had all those great guys like Frank Miller, Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore – and *Crisis* had just happened.

As much as I love comic book art, that's really where my roots lie – I'm a sucker for good writing. Give me good writing and I'll follow anybody. All the good writers were at DC at the time, so I was a DC fan – but then, somehow or other, I found myself at Marvel.

CH: Is that what Marvel Knights was all about? Bringing a similar sensibility to DC's Vertigo titles to the Marvel Universe?

JQ: To me, everything is about story. Before I got into comics, I went to art school and got my major in illustration, but I was really into music at the time too and I was a songwriter. I learned a lot about writing from songs. When you're producing a song, you can gild the turd as much as you want – but

it the song isn't there – if the basics aren't there – it doesn't matter. At the end of the day, for me – and I'm someone who has personally been an artist all my life – we can have the most amazing artists in the world, but if the story isn't good it won't keep readers coming back.

CH: How important is the fact that you were, and are, a successful artist to the work you do now? In particular, does it provide you with a greater understanding of creators?

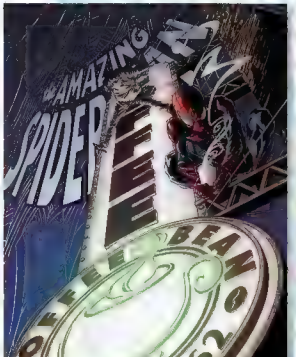
JQ: I came in with a unique skill, in that I've sat on both sides of the table. Certainly, I've done my best over my career to treat the freelancers who work for us in exactly the way that I wanted to be treated. That really boils down to one thing: being straight up with people and being honest even when you have bad news. I always said to editors, 'If you're going to screw me, tell me that you're going to screw me.' I understand that it's part of the job'.

CH: How much time do you have to do your own work?

JQ: Very little. I contribute to other people's writing, but I don't have time to sit down and actually write a story. The last thing I wrote was the outline for an episode of the *Ultimate Spider-Man* cartoon, but that won't come out for a while. Drawing-wise, I don't have time to do anything continuous – but I try to draw at least a cover a month if I can, simply because I need to for my own sanity. It's something I miss very much.

CH: With Brian Bendis, Matt Fraction, Jason Aaron, Jonathan Hickman and Ed Brubaker co-writing, and John Romita Jr, Oliver Coipel and Adam Kubert sharing art chores, is *Avengers Vs X-Men* more difficult to manage than previous crossovers?

JQ: All these events are very draining. It takes a lot of manpower to get these things going, and to coordinate them so that we don't stumble. It's always a lot of work.



CH: After last year's *X-Men: Schism*, which pitted Cyclops and Wolverine against each other, *Avengers Vs X-Men* sees Cyclops going up against Captain America. What gives?

JQ: That's what the fans want, they salivate over it. Just look at *Avengers Assemble* – you've got it all: Cap vs Thor, Cap vs Iron Man, the Hulk vs Thor – you have all of those one-on-ones. As for Wolverine, he's caught in the middle as he plays both sides.

CH: Brian Michael Bendis is also writing *Spider-Men*, which will see *Ultimate Spider-Man* Miles Morales joining forces with the main Marvel Universe Peter Parker for the first time.

JQ: I've always been the biggest advocate of not crossing over the Marvel and Ultimate Universes, but when I pitched it to Brian, he nearly fell off his chair! I was barely through the first sentence and he was, 'Yes, let's do it!' It's another one of those stories that we're really proud of.

CH: Is the release of *Spider-Men* meant to coincide with July's *Amazing Spider-Man* movie?

JQ: We were actually trying to concoct something for Spider-Man's 50th anniversary, which is coming up, and the problem with that was that

Joe Quesada was the first artist to become Marvel's editor-in-chief

resident Spidey scribe] Dan Slott had his storylines really locked and loaded, so we didn't want to interfere with that. We were sitting in a room, wondering what to do [and I raised my hand and said, 'Okay, everybody's going to look at me as the guy with an eye in my forehead, but I think this is the story.' And that's where it really started. **HI!**

Superhero shaman

Grant Morrison

Mainstream comics' most consistently oddball and ambitious writer on leaving *Batman*, loving jean-clad Superman, and the joy of his latest project, *Happy*.

By Stephen Jewell

Grant Morrison is a unique voice in the world of comics: happy to work on the largest, most iconic characters for best-selling runs – not just DC giants like Superman and Batman, his current charges, but the JLA, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four and others too – while at the same time balancing this with much more personal work.

Most of the latter tends to appear through DC's dark-fantasy-and-stuff imprint Vertigo – *Seaguy*, *The Filth*, *We3* and, going back a bit, *Animal Man* are amongst the most celebrated – but, unlike many other writers, he brings a similar level of (sometimes baffling) ambition and invention to everything he does, be it a massive company-wide event like *52*, which he managed to turn into something new and strange, or a very personal 'small' crossover such as *Seven Soldiers*, which Morrison stitched together out of the most unlikely raw material.

The remainder of 2012 will be a time of great change for Morrison: not only will the Glasgow comic book auteur begin to wrap up his seven-year (seven year!) run on the Caped Crusader's various titles, largely through the recently-launched second volume of *Batman Incorporated*, but he will also debut *Happy*, his first original work for Image Comics. This is set to appear just before Morrisoncon, September's intimate Las Vegas convention that bears his name, and promises to be a very different sort of tale indeed.

According to Image publisher Eric Stephenson, *Happy*, illustrated by Darick Robertson, is the first of several projects that Morrison has lined up for the currently-thriving independent giant. "It's really cool, because it's a crime story – and Grant hasn't really done crime comics before," he reveals. "Anyone familiar with Grant's work knows that it's going to be his own take on the genre. The first issue is very, very good."

As we'd suspected, of course.

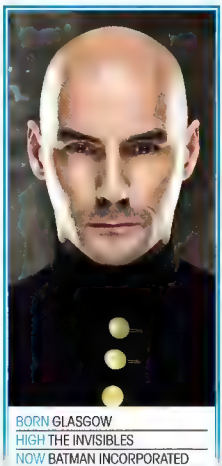
Comic Heroes: *Happy* sounds like the name of a self-help book, but we've heard it's actually some sort of seasonal tale...

Grant Morrison: It's my Christmas story, like how *A Christmas Carol* was Charles Dickens' Christmas story or *It's A Wonderful Life* was Frank Capra's.

I've always wanted to do something with Darick, so when our mutual friend Adam Mortimer [director of Morrison's upcoming indie film, *Sinaterra*] told me that he was available earlier this year, I pulled the idea for *Happy* from my notebook and started writing.

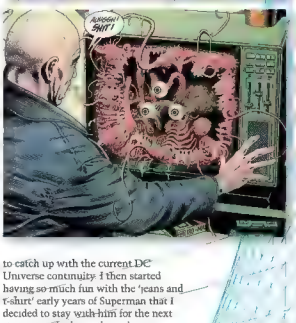
It's quite a simple, direct little story, done in four issues, that condenses a few of my favourite themes into a concentrated blast. Other than that, I don't want to say too much until nearer release. I love contributing a few glittery bits of mosaic to the mega-entity that is the DC Universe, but I've always had creator-owned projects going at the same time as my more commercial work.

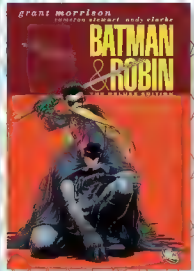
CH: Speaking of more commercial work, you're in the lucky position of being able to replace distinctive – we thought unique! – frequent *Batman* collaborator Frank Quitely with Chris Burnham, whose dynamically detailed work on *Batman Incorporated* is from almost exactly the same mould...



BORN GLASGOW
HIGH THE INVISIBLES
NOW BATMAN INCORPORATED
MORE www.grant-morrison.com

"I had so much fun with Supe's 'jeans and t-shirt' early years"





GM: Chris is halfway through his second issue right now, and he's breaking down the pages and fracturing the layouts in a way I haven't been since *Manhunter* and *Elektra Lives Again* in the '70s and '80s. It looks amazing, and after years of widescreen cinema layouts in comics it feels fresh – and almost revolutionary – again.

CH: You've put Batman through the wringer: at one point you apparently killed him off, then you trapped him at the dawn of time; now you've got him franchising his approach to crime-fighting, a very modern twist on the superhero genre.

GM: The story ties a bow around my marathon run on *Batman*, which started out as an intended 12 issues, and wound up occupying six years of my life, four different titles and 72 individual episodes. I've grown to love *Batman*, and this was the biggest story I could come up with to end on. And it's the kind of story that I don't think has ever been done before with the character, which is quite unusual.

CH: Before you finish, though, you're going to have to wrap up plot threads dating right back to 2006's 'Batman & Son', which introduced Bruce Wayne and Talia al Ghul's sinister son Damian, now the latest Robin.

GM: The finale is basically Batman versus Talia, with Damian caught in the middle of a war that rages across continents. It's a big Shakespearean-style tragedy done in three four-issue arcs, one that takes Batman to his own personal Hell – but not necessarily back out again. And then I'm done.

CH: Of course, you're currently handling Superman too, in the New 52's revamped *Action Comics*. You're scheduled to quit with #16, but is this another one that's going to end up eating up years of your life?

GM: It started out as six issues, intended to introduce a new take on Superman – but yes, I extended the run to catch up with the current DC Universe continuity. I then started having so much fun with the 'jeans and t-shirt' early years of Superman that I decided to stay with him for the next story arc, which ran through issues #10-12. After the President Superman story in #9, we're onto a three parter which introduces Superman's new secret identity – and sees the return of a classic John Broome character, updated and revamped for the New 52.

CH: Before that you'll headline the inaugural Morrisoncon, to be held at Las Vegas' Hard Rock Hotel at the end of September – though, apparently, it's not all about you...

GM: The idea is to do a more sophisticated, focused and intimate boutique-type show. I was asked if I'd be willing to pose as a figurehead for a kind of international festival of flamboyance, but it's not a celebration of my work as such. We want to bring together a group of like-minded creatives at the forefront of their business, and allow them to collaborate and talk about the stuff that really excites and inspires them.

It's also going to be more rock 'n' roll than the usual comic-based show – quite literally, in the sense that we're encouraging all the participants to demonstrate different facets of their talents, so in addition to some in-depth panel discussions and workshops, there will be performances, readings and music.

CH: You'll only have about 1,000 people there, but the guest list is good: you, Jonathan Hickman, Jason Aaron, Gerard Way, Jim Lee and Frank Quitely...

GM: They're all people I've worked with, or who share similar sensibilities and interests. It's less like a typical comic convention and more of a life-changing, paradigm shifting weekend at Esalen – or one of those weird shaes magic/Thelemic retreats they used to hold in German castles! [#]

***Batman Incorporated* is on sale now.**

Above: There's nothing remotely boring or predictable about Morrison's varied work...

Art with teeth?

Georges Jeanty

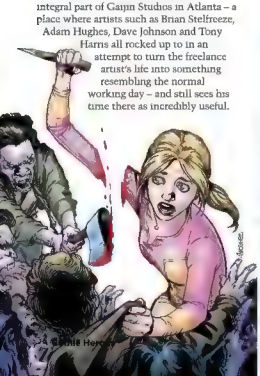
Jeanty was already a fan favourite for his work in the '90s drawing superheroes at DC, but his widely-acclaimed run on *Buffy* has earned him an army of new admirers.

By Joel Meadows

Georges Jeanty first came to prominence drawing some of DC's biggest guns – Green Lantern, Superboy, even Superman – in the late '90s, a classic superhero artist in the clean, sunny tradition of John Byrne, Alan Davis, perhaps Michael Golden. But that was an age ago. Over the past few years, he's become better known for a classic adventure comic of a very different type: one where nobody wears spandex, and being able to handle convincing facial expressions is far more important than the way your capes billow, or the inventive ideas you have for depicting a power ring.

As artist on Dark Horse's much-liked recent run of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* comics, a series that picked up on the page where the adored TV series left off when it ended back in 2003 – completely canonical, it was even dubbed 'Season Eight' by show creator Joss Whedon himself – Jeanty has reached a whole new audience, pleasingly many were *Buffy* TV fans who'd never picked up monthly comics on a regular basis before.

Early on in his career, Jeanty was an integral part of Gaijin Studios in Atlanta – a place where artists such as Brian Stelfreeze, Adam Hughes, Dave Johnson and Tony Harris all rocked up to in an attempt to turn the freelance artist's life into something resembling the normal working day – and still sees his time there as incredibly useful.



BORN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
HIGH BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER
NOW BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER
MORE www.kabalounge.com

"Whatever I'm doing, I'm trying to tell the best story that I can"

Comic Heroes: Gaijin Studios was amazingly successful – it lasted something like 19 years – and a dozen or so prominent creators worked there...

Georges Jeanty: Before I got into Gaijin I actually had some trepidation about it, as joining the collective was going to be very expensive. But a friend told me, 'Look at it as if you were going to college. What you'd pay for college, you're paying for Gaijin'. And that's pretty much what it was; there was just such a wealth of experience there, and you could go to everybody and ask them anything you wanted. I'd hang out with Brian Stelfreeze and Adam Hughes and we'd talk about art. Brian and Adam helped me out with a couple of covers I was doing, and Adam would talk to me about his process and the way he coloured.

CH: Your early superhero work has many fans but most people will know you for drawing *Buffy Season Eight* and, more recently, *Season Nine*. Unusually for a licensed property, creator Joss Whedon was actively involved...

G.J: Oh, absolutely; during *Season Eight* Joss was very hands-on. We talked probably once or twice a week. Once it got to *Season*

CR-
OOK!
3. THOUGHT 2 HAVE ACTION MIGHT GET THE CHEESEWORDS DUMPING BUT THERE'S SOMETHING I DON'T ANTICIPATE
Everyday's GOOD! But he's not good enough to take on a giant MANTHANE dungeon handedly!
UHHH!

IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO MY SISTER'S SON I'M HOLDING YOU RESPONSIBLE!
AND THE FORMAL TERM FOR SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION OF SOFT TISSUE IS "DEATH BY FIRE."
WHAT'S 3 TIMES 3?

BUFFY
THE VAMPIRE SLAYER
NOW THE WOLF-MAN'S GONE FOREVER!
WAITS! YOU'RE NOT STUFF BACK IN ENGLAND, SHE'S NOW A RESPONSIBILITY!
NIKKI is THE VAMPIRE SLAYER!

Nine, though – through no fault of his own – he was off doing the *Avengers* movie, so maybe that took precedence! But Joss was always there. With everything I do on *Buffy*, I have to copy him in on any emails, so it's not like he's ever left out of the loop. We may not hear from him as much, but he's definitely still very much involved.

CH: Some artists find drawing licensed books a strain but you seem to relish it.

GJ: I actually love working on other people's properties, just to see if I can actually get them done. You're always sitting there wondering, 'Can I do this justice?' Quite a lot of people say they like the *Buffy* material, so I can only assume I'm getting something right. And the great thing about working with Twentieth Century Fox is it's essentially a one-stop shop; all I have to do is get my work approved in terms of character likenesses, then I can do any and all *Buffy* stuff. I don't have to go to individual actors, like some of the people on *Star Trek* might have to do.

CH: You were a fan of the television show, of course?

GJ: Actually, I'd never seen an episode – and I'd certainly never done anything *Buffy*-related until I got the job on the Dark Horse book. I watched all seven seasons in a month to get up to speed, it wasn't very big eye-opener at the time. But since I wasn't familiar with the size of the fanbase, I wasn't aware of how much pressure was involved in drawing the series. Indeed, had I known about it beforehand, I probably would have thought it too daunting a project to take on!

CH: For some creators, a long association with a particular branded character can be a millstone...

GJ: I never even considered that at the beginning because I didn't think I'd be on *Buffy* for that long. Now, obviously, that question has more relevance but I do feel like I've been able to bring something particular to it. I'm very proud of what I've done.

CH: You began your career drawing superheroes but you're now better known for your supernatural work. Are you content with the niche you've carved for yourself?

GJ: I'm a really big superhero fan and so, if I had to choose, I'd probably go with the superhero stuff, but I love where I am now. I'm a storyteller – I'm an artist but I'm also a storyteller – so I just feel that whatever it is I'm doing, I'm trying to tell the best story that I can. I always ask myself if I'm conveying the story effectively – I approach it as if it's something that the reader's picking up for the first time. **NH**

Above: Wolfman Vampire Slayer

Georges Jeanty is currently working on *Buffy Season Nine*.

One of The Boys

Darick Robertson

With his scratchy, inky linework and leering faces, Darick Robertson has become comics' premier artist of the gruesome and the gleefully vile, of ugly men doing ugly things – and with night-black humour absolutely guaranteed.

By Joel Meadows

Sure, he's done 'normal' superheroes – Wolverine and then Nightcrawler at Marvel, two favourite X-Men; even the New Warriors – but Darick Robertson is better known for comics of a very different flavour: dark, dirty, often queasily violent. The artist first made a proper splash as co-creator of Vertigo's *Transmetropolitan* back in the late '90s – the near-future adventures of an outlaw gonzo journalist – and that book's distinctive, square-baiting style has seeped into most of what he's done since. Indeed, Robertson has become the go-to collaborator for writers wanting to explore the seamier, nastier sides of life – and if there are gallows jokes involved too, all the merrier.

For the past five years, Robertson's been handling art chores on *The Boys*, that twisted, satirical and generally boundary-pushing parody of the superhero team book he co-created with writer Garth Ennis. Fans of that title needn't despair – yes, he is currently taking a break from the series, but he will be returning to its pages for the conclusion later this year – while, in the meantime, there are such treats as the recent *Butcher, Baker, Candlestickmaker* miniseries, detailing the gruesome origin of The Boys' smarking leader, Billy Butcher, to devour.

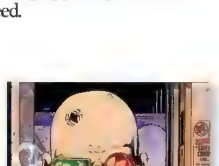
Make no mistake: *The Boys* may be grinding towards its conclusion, but future Darick Robertson projects promise to be just as cheerfully unpleasant…

BORN SAN MATEO, CALIFORNIA
HIGH TRANSMETROPOLITAN
NOW THE BOYS
MORE darickrobertson.com

Comic Heroes: First up, tell us about your leave of absence from *The Boys*. What gives?

Darick Robertson: I'm going to come back and do the last issue, which will be out in November. The monthly schedule was really killing me, and we all wanted the book to come out regularly. I really wanted to take the year off, allowing me to do the Butcher miniseries at a slower pace, because it's such a great story. Garth wrote such a compelling origin for the character that I couldn't miss out on drawing it, actually, it was important to me that I managed to do all of our core cast's origin stories.

Now that *The Boys* is ending I'm sad that there's no opportunity for me to come back and do more, but I think Russell Braun's done a great job as my replacement. Bless him for showing my work respect, and for trying to keep the theme and the love going. I'll be working slowly on the book's final issue too, so I can bring the same level of detail and love to it. *The Boys* needs a good finish.



CH: So is this the end for the characters?

DR: Maybe not! I might come back as a writer, do my own miniseries with these guys. These are things both Garth and Dynamite are supportive of, but we'll see how it goes. I've got a lot of other good things coming up too, though: new creator-owned properties with people like Christos Gage and Grant Morrison.

CH: When you started out, you were inked by other people, but increasingly you've been finishing yourself. How so?

DR: I've worked with some wonderful inkers, but my favourite artists all tend to ink themselves – people like Brian Bolland or David Mazzucchelli. Of course, you also get some wonderful combinations – Alan Davis and Paul Neary, or Davis and Mark Farmer – and I've often dreamed that I would find my own perfect partner. I think maybe I'm close to it with Richard Clark, the guy I'm currently working with – he really gets me, and we're close friends which helps – but generally I find

that inking my own stuff is the only way I can ensure a book has my vision. And if I drop the ball, I've got no one to blame'

CH: It's hard to think of a grittier and more nightmarish artist – where does all this darkness come from?

DR: Growing up, I loved horror movies – and I like to be scared. When I saw *Jaws*, I had to learn everything I could about sharks – I've found that drawing things is the way I process what freaks me out. It's the same way I deal with anxiety: I draw things that are horrible. So I like a dark story, because if I can control it then I can understand it from a different perspective.

CH: You got to reimagine Marvel's origin for The Punisher in the series *Punisher: Born*, way back in 2002. That must have been fun, especially as you've said you're a long-time fan...?

> **"My first love was actually Frank Frazetta and Boris Vallejo fantasy paintings"**

DR: I based the raw Frank Castle from *Born* on a young Marlon Brando, for the setting, editor Nick Lowe gave me photos from his dad, who'd been in Vietnam, which I used for reference. I'd drawn Frank a few times for Marvel before, and I'd always been a big fan of Garth's take on the character, I think he and [artist] Steve Dillon really got Frank. Garth understood that he's really not a superhero, he's a psychotic – and yet he's kept his humour. His mission has always been really clear, and no matter how crazy he got, you always rooted for him. That said, I was a big fan of the early Jim Lee and Carl Potts versions, and the John Romita Jr/Chuck Dixon stuff was great as well.

CH: You're known for your gritty tough guys with guns – your Punishers, most of *The Boys* – but you took a slightly different direction writing and drawing Conan for a Dark Horse one-shot. He's still a big tough guy – but with a sword!

DR: My first love was actually Frank Frazetta and Boris Vallejo fantasy paintings and heavy metal music too, of course. In fact, I liked that fantasy stuff so much that the first thing I tried to do as an artist was paint like Frazetta. But I was about 12, so my stuff was terrible. I guess I'm really more a fan of the genre than of Conan per se – though I do like him – and by the time I got an opportunity to write him, it felt very natural. That story went through very little revision – and the heroes seemed to like it, so I hit the ground running. I've been asked to write more since, and I love that people seem to respond to me in that role as well; it's exciting, because there are things I'd love to write. [RT]

Darick Robertson returns for the conclusion of *The Boys* at the end of the year.

Above: The dark and gritty work of Darick Robertson – not for the faint hearted.

Crossed examined

Si Spurrier

The man behind one of the sickest – and best – comics on the internet talks dolphin rape, writing himself into his work, and defending remote Scottish islands...

By Rob Power

As the man behind *Crossed: Wish You Were Here*, one of the most outlandish, shocking and downright entertaining comics on the web, Si Spurrier has a lot to answer for. A long-time *2000 AD* writer, he's crossed the pond and written for Marvel, produced a crop of novels and is swiftly becoming one of the leading lights among the current batch of British talent. *Comic Heroes* caught up with him at Kapow! to talk webcomics and *Wish You Were Here*...

Comic Heroes: Where did you get the idea for *Crossed: Wish You Were Here*, and how did you get involved?

Si Spurrier: I was approached by Avatar about two years ago. It's an awesome company, very writer-led. Somewhere along the way, they realised that *Crossed* – Garth Ennis' masterpiece – was the biggest money earner, and they decided, in agreement with Garth, that they should start augmenting it with other categories. The concept is so massive you can do whatever you like with it – you can tell a different story with it, in a different part of the world, revolving around different people.

CH: Why was the decision taken to make *Wish You Were Here* a webcomic?

SS: We had this idea that it'd be fun because *Freakangels*, Warren Ellis' free webcomic, finished and that was a wildly successful and unexpected model. People would read this free webcomic and, at the end of the six months, go out and buy the trade edition. So we thought we could try something similar with *Crossed*, and a lot of the decisions and the choices I made trickled down from the reality of that form.

CH: *Wish You Were Here* is told in diary form – how did you arrive at that idea?

SS: I couldn't write these huge arcs expecting people to go back constantly to remind themselves what happened, so it made more sense to tell individual stories that could be told in short chunks. It followed that something quite journalistic would work well. From there, I realised I had to be totally honest and really engaged with the main character, and that he should be a reflection of me.

BORN 'SOMEWHERE', UK
HIGH LOBSTER RANDOM
NOW WISH YOU WERE HERE
MORE www.simonspurrier.co.uk

"I want to make the point that this isn't just torture porn"

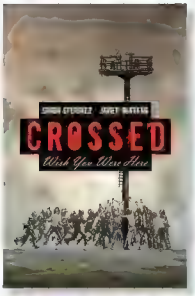
CH: The central character, Shakey, is certainly very Spurrier-like...

SS: This guy is *very* similar to me; he's my comic book twin up until his world changes completely, and it's therefore a lot easier to imagine how he would respond to these situations with any sort of validity – which is not to say I'd have made all the decisions he makes. I think he's a bit of a coward, really. Still, I imagine readers are thinking they're getting something quite personal.

When I go to conventions in America, people come up to me and go, "Oh, this is the sickest thing in comics, I fucking love it, man!" And I'm saying, "Good, that's a perfectly reasonable reason to like it, but there's quite a lot else going on. It's quite a clever concept actually. It's about stripping apart morality and people and seeing what happens." And they go, "Yeah, but that fucking thing with the rape, man!"

Hence me waffling all this time about something metafictional, because I want to make the point that this isn't just torture porn, the dolphin rape notwithstanding!

CH: Did you have to think twice about putting the more extreme elements in?



SS: Er, no. I didn't; I jumped straight in! I mean, it's funny, apropos everything I've just said – the tendency is to approach these projects from the point of view of wanting to shock and outdo everyone who did it first. And I had that view, or at least wanted to play that game – but didn't want every single episode to be like that. So I thought I'd start with something suitably shocking but actually quite funny to set the tone a bit, so people would go, "Oh, that's gross, but tee hee!"

CH: How far ahead have you got the story planned out?

SS: One of the choices I made when I approached it, given that it's a journal, was that I was going to be deliberately lazy when it came to plotting. When I sit down to write a new episode, given that it's supposed to be about all this random horrible stuff that's happening to this guy, if I know exactly what's going to happen and it feels like it's all meshing together, it's going to feel disingenuous. I know where it will end in two years; there's a chance it might spin on longer but there's an ending in my mind – quite how we get there is something I'm not entirely sure about yet.

CH: Why did you decide to set your story on a remote Scottish island?

SS: Because it's such a long-form project, I had to find reasons to follow this group of people for two years. There had to be a base that would serve as an anchor, and then you could tell other stories from there. Why Scotland? Because if I was in Shakey's position, that's where I'd go. You'd have to go somewhere cold because these freaks don't look after themselves particularly well, they'd freeze or starve. I'd want to go somewhere easily defendable, and I spent some time on Google and discovered Cava; it sounds really fun and it has a really cool history. It felt like if I was to go anywhere in the world to defend myself, it would be there. **CH!**

***Crossed: Wish You Were Here* is available to read at www.crossedcomic.com.**

Above: Spurrier made his name writing post-war strips for *2000 AD*.

Hyper Inc

Chris Burnham

Some comic artists seem to arrive fully-formed, as with *Batman Incorporated*'s Chris Burnham, his images sharp, clear and hyper-real. But appearances, of course, can be deceptive...

By Joel Meadows

You'll know Chris Burnham's art, even if you don't know the name, he's the guy who draws more like Frank Quitely than Frank Quitely does, the new *Batman* artist whose work is all big boots, long skinny legs, and almost fetishistically tight line-work. It's a distinctive style, and a highly pleasing one, on titles like *Batman & Robin* and the new incarnation of *Batman Incorporated*, it meshes perfectly with what writer Grant Morrison is trying to do: tell globe-spanning adventures full of big ideas in the crisp, clean language of a TV cartoon.

Burnham never trained as an artist, but instead did a TV and radio course at college, one he quit, realising his heart wasn't in it, for early gigs working on *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* adventures for Moonstone Books, Chicago-based specialists in comics featuring licensed properties such as Zorro, Doc Savage and The Phantom – as well as the '70s TV supernatural investigator. From here came a number of jobs for Image, and a couple for Marvel, and then the really big time: working with celebrated writer Grant Morrison on the latest incarnation of the *Batman* mega-epic he's been telling since 2006. It may seem as if Burnham is an overnight success, but he's been working professionally since 2003, as he explained when we caught up with him at Emerald City Comic Con in Seattle.

Comic Heroes: How did you get started?

Chris Burnham: I'd made a little ashcan comic with a buddy of mine, a 14-page story with a character we'd created. We printed up 1,000 copies of it, and I went around the conventions that year giving them out; everyone behind a table got one. Pretty much all the jobs I've ever gotten can be traced back to me handing those things out. For the Moonstone gig, Pat Olliffe was friends with an editor and he thought, 'Oh, he'd be perfect for this sort of thing'. So that got me work for two years.

CH: Were you one of those guys who kept doodling superheroes as a kid?

CB: I've drawn my whole life, ever since I could hold a crayon; in fact, one of my first memories is of drawing the Hulk. So I've always wanted to do this, but just figured,

BORN CONNECTICUT, US
HIGH ELEPHANTMEN
NOW BATMAN INCORPORATED
MORE www.chrisburnham.com

"I've drawn my whole life, ever since I could hold a crayon"

'Oh, that's something I could do when I grow up'. Then, halfway through college, I realised, 'Oh shit, I *am* kind of grown up. If I want to do it, I've got to do this now'.

CH: Most people first noticed you when *Elephantmen* creator Richard Starkings got you to do a backup strip for Image...

CB: Yes! Starkings was one of the guys I gave that ashcan to years and years ago. I heard he was doing *Elephantmen*, and when he mentioned in passing that every issue was going to have a backup, I emailed him out of the blue. So I asked for it – and I got it.

CH: Many comic book artists have some obvious models they draw from, but with you it's especially clear, isn't it?

CB: Well, Frank Quitely – real name Vince Deighan – is a colossal influence these days, as well as people like Geof Darrow, Seth Fisher, Moebius and Ladronn. Ladronn was actually my 'in' because he drew *Hip Flask* – and *Elephantmen* was a *Hip Flask* spin-off. I was going for 'Ladronn meets Milton Caniff' when I did my first *Elephantmen*. Obviously, there's also a lot of Jack Kirby, John Buscema, Walt Simonson and Erik

Larsen in there too, and I'm bringing in a lot more manga with the diagonal panels. Tetsuo Hara, the *Fist Of The North Star* guy, is my man.

CH: But it's the 'Quitely' thing that made you such an obvious fit for *Batman & Robin*, we'd guess...?

CB: It was a crazy email out of the blue I'd done this one-shot at Image with Joe Casey called *Officer Downe*, which was a wild ultra-violent thing where a super cop kills the bad guy. Joe is friends with Grant Morrison, and I guess Grant liked it. So I got an email from Joe, asking me, 'Hey, are you free to do five pages in Grant's *Batman & Robin* finale!?' They were just super-screwed on deadline and needed a third artist for the book.

CH: You're now the regular artist on DC's *Batman Incorporated*, about to relaunch as one of the second wave of DC's New 52 books; they've even got you on an 'exclusive' deal.

CB: As a freelancer you never know where your next paycheck is coming from, and I've had a number of experiences where I did gigs – like a couple for Marvel, which I thought I knocked out of the park – and then they never called me again. So, as far as I knew, I was going to do one issue of *Batman Incorporated* – and then I would get fired and never again work in comics. Being offered two years of guaranteed employment instead, theoretically working on *Batman* with Grant, was too good to pass up.

CH: What's it like working with Grant? It seems he demands a lot of his artists if the strip's going to really sing...

CB: I'm definitely trying to bring it there with the big boys, and following on from so many amazing artists on Grant's big *Batman* run – especially Vince/Frank, who I get compared to all the time, which is fair enough – I've got some big shoes to fill. So it's a lot of effort. Of course, you then get Grant's scripts where he's always saying 'Try to make this look like a classic Neal Adams image – but better!' **[A2]**

Above: Clockwise, from top left: one detailed artwork and odd panel shapes on *Batman Incorporated*; *Officer Downe*; and the Amory Wars

***Batman Incorporated* relaunched with a new #1 in May, with Chris Burnham the lead penciller.**

Star Man

James Robinson

For a Brit writer, James Robinson has had an unusual career: no *2000 AD* or Marvel UK in his back catalogue, but DC heritage heroes by the cartload...

By Stephen Jewell

Alongside Animal Man, Swamp Thing and (to an extent) John Constantine – who now appears to exist in two different incarnations, a Vertigo and a 'mainline' – there's one cult favourite from the dark fantasy side of town who's made a particularly welcome return to DC's regular universe of late, as part of the big shake-up that is the New 52. We refer, of course, to Shade.

No, not the identically named 'Changing Man' also recently revived, as a member of Justice League Dark – but instead the immortal Golden Age super-villain, a character who used to fight the Flash but was famously reinvented by James Robinson as a dapper Victorian anti-hero during his seven-year run on *Starman*. (Eventually he would turn to the light, and become a mentor to that title's titular hero, Jack Knight.)

Now, over a decade later, British-born, San Francisco-based Robinson is making a welcome return to the self-styled 'Master of Darkness' in a 12-issue *Shade* miniseries, featuring art from a host of top talents, including Cully Hamner, Darwyn Cooke, Frazer Irving, Gene Ha and Jill Thompson.

We caught up with him at a point in time when he was desperately trying to keep things under his hat – which DC stalwart was about to be reworked as openly gay, for instance. This turns out to have been the Golden Age Green Lantern, Alan Scott.

Robinson, who'd depicted the mainstream comic industry's first gay kiss in *Starman*, way back in 1998, would later give his thoughts to the *New York Daily News*: "I was putting the team together, and I realised one of the only downsides to relaunching the Justice Society as young, vibrant heroes again was that Alan Scott's son was no longer going to exist. I thought that was a shame, and then it occurred to me, why not just make Alan Scott gay?"

As easy as that, eh! But back to Shade...

Comic Heroes: Bet you never thought you'd be doing a Shade series like this, eh?

James Robinson: It's been a real delight. I'm just getting the art from Frazer Irving for his three-part arc set in London, and it's been like a dream. The designs and initial art that Gene Ha has done for the final issue, which will be the origin of the character, are just great too. I really appreciate how DC has given me this chance and stuck with the book, even though it's more of a critical success than a bestseller.

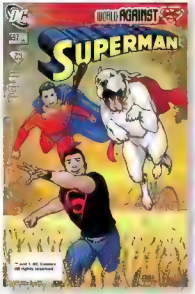
BORN MANCHESTER
HIGH STARMAN
NOW EARTH 2
MORE www.dcwikia.com

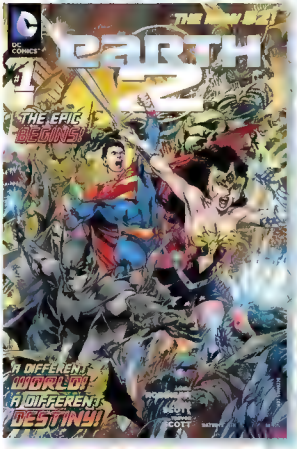
> **It's fun to introduce all these little supporting characters**

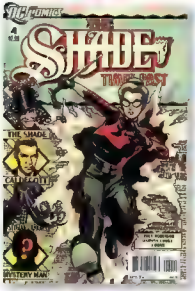
CH: With Shade also visiting Australia and Paris as he attempts to track down the mysterious assassin who wants him dead, you seem keen to take the erstwhile Richard Swift away from his comfort zone in Opal City...

JR: I realised that what people probably wanted, and expected, was basically more of the same. But I was more interested in showing a guy who's been around for almost 200 years. He's seen and done a lot, he's travelled and met people – and it's fun to introduce all these little supporting characters, both heroes and villains, along the way.

You're actually going to meet one of them in the English arc, a British magical superhero. He's an Irish traveller who uses gypsy magic, so he's like this rough, working-class Doctor Strange, who I think people might find interestingly different from the normal magical characters.







CH: Although *Shade* hasn't proved to be one of the New 52's runaway hits, you say you've plenty of ideas for future stories...

JR: After the 12 issues are done, we'll have to see if DC wants to take another chance on the book, as sales haven't been great. But if they do, I've actually come up with this smaller – but still epic – story involving Shade, Batman and Ra's al Ghul, dealing with different kinds of immortality, which I think would make for a really exciting book

CH: Recently you've attracted headlines for your new alternate universe title, *Earth 2*, which debuted as part of the New 52's Second Wave...

JR: It was frustrating doing interviews before the first issue came out, because I was trying to not to reveal that it begins with the death of the big three, leaving these other heroes to rise to the occasion; they have to take up the mantle from Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, and become that world's guiding influence. Keeping that a secret while not lying to people has been a real challenge.

CH: Along with Alan Scott and Golden Age Flash Jay Garrick, many other classic characters have been reimagined as part of *Earth 2*'s diverse cast.

JR: There's also Al Pratt, who is destined to become the Atom, and we've just revealed the visuals for our version of Hawkgirl. There are others that will also be joining too, but that's a surprise. I don't want to reveal too much, but there's a whole gamut of characters that will be coming into the series as it develops in the future. This is an ongoing, exciting thing that we're doing, and I hope readers will be constantly interested in what's happening. As they see the team form, and the world come together, they'll have more and more invested in it.

Alasdair Robinson's probably best known for his seven-year stint on Starman

CH: *Earth 2* is born out of the same continuity as Paul Levitz and Kevin Maguire's *World's Finest*, although the two titles will initially take very different paths.

JR: Power Girl and Huntress, who were the Earth 2 Supergirl and Robin, are actually now on Earth 1, so the plan is that I develop Earth 2 while Paul writes the adventures of that pair in the main DC Universe. We want to get the two books up and running and in a comfortable place first, before we cross over. Obviously at some point the two books will dovetail into each other and there'll be some sort of meeting between the various characters. **CH:**

***Earth 2* is on sale now.**

Female of the Species

Meet the comic book Bad Girls, original sinners big on the stink and the snarl; independent, confident, going their own way and dancing that thin line between 'good' and 'bad' most delightfully. But who's queen bee? **By Matt Bielby**

The bad old days of the '80s and '90s boosted to glory, then nearly destroyed, one of the great iconic comic book figures: the unrepentant Bad Girl. Thus was the era of Shi and Zealot, Witchblade and Elektra – leggy maidens with weapons who trouble our Baddest of the Bad list here – and Barb Wire, Razor and a dozen others who don't.

Violent supertypes, reformed criminals, demonic anti-heroines: these and many more standards are the Bad Girl bread-and-butter. Cat-black-clad and sexually aggressive, sometimes cruel and almost always mercenary. As we run through our list, a few tropes assert themselves again and again: will they/won't they sexual manoeuvring with more straight-laced heroes. Violent missions that leave our heroines emotionally stranded. Super warrior-skills that, frankly, beggar belief.

Alongside this good stuff: exaggerated art, outrageous outfits and cheesecake poses run riot. (You worry about the creators of some of these ladies so obsessed with the perfect body so unsure of what one actually *looks like*.) Complex backstories abound: many girls on this list have violent backgrounds, heavy with abuse, murdered loved ones and (depressingly often) rape.

REVENGE IS A COMMON motive for the comic book Bad Girl, her moral code often secretive and ambiguous: where human, our heroine rarely gets through a story without her clothing ripped, her face splattered in blood, when she's something other, we get an eyeful of occult voodoo going on.

This list is chocka with demons and demon-hunters, rogue angels, vampires and wielders of supernatural weapons of every stripe; it's the rare item of clothing that doesn't have a skull (or some mystical insignia) lovingly embroidered onto it.

With the wider of the Bad Girls, the ingredients list seems too obvious, the recipe offensively bland: fail to mitigate the dominatrix aspects with humour, say, and you create a very dull copycat indeed. Still, it's almost a given with these gals that allure and danger walk hand-in-hand – some must surely have been *designed* as STD metaphors in human form. At its most useless, this is a list of tragic figures – under-imagined, rocking sex suits' for all it's worth, and bringing nothing to the party but cronch and ass shots, penetrative weapons and grim scowls.

Expressionless or clenching teeth, they pose in the midst of carnage as bodily fluids (yes, we're talking blood here) spray everywhere. These weakest of sisters come across as if created by horny teenagers with a lightbox and a copy of *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Edition*.

> **"It's almost a given that allure and danger walk hand-in-hand"**

The comic book equivalent of *Weird Science*.

But! At her best, the Bad Girl is something amazing. The great figures on the following list are complex and endearing, fascinating and unknowable, crucially, they appeal to women at least as much as they do men.

This rundown has been compiled from the votes and suggestions of *Comic Heroes* staffers and contributors, friends and comic book professionals; popular choices have been barred from it (Lara Croft and the assorted Danger Girls, say, all far too much), lesser-known contenders sadly omitted (the Spirit's squeezes like Silk Satin and Sand Saref, for their relative obscurity, and many pure *villains* rejected entirely. So it's bye-bye Typhoid Mary and Cheetah, so long Huntress and Misty Knight; you were either too naughty, or not naughty enough.

The Bad Girl, in her best sense, has something confusing and intriguing about her: if 'evil' she's not entirely so, and perhaps even threatens to turn to the right given the right set of circumstances or the right man; if 'good', then she's sneaky good, or uncontrollably violent, or riddled with hidden agendas.

30 29 28

Angela

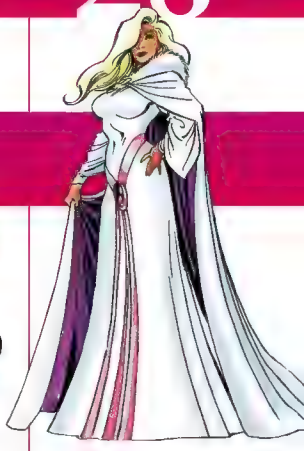
The '90s was a crosshatched tundra littered with landfill Bad Girls, dismal photocopies of photocopies, each less original and more embarrassing than the last. Some, however, retained a glimmer of potential – not least Angela, an angel cum-bounty hunter on Heaven's payroll created in a short-lived, soon-litigious collab between *Spawn*-creator Todd McFarlane and noted fantasy legend Neil Gaiman.

She was over-praised at the time – assorted mid-'90s fan awards raved over this over-decorated, under-dressed sour puss valkyrie, demanding yet more of her – but her Spawn-hunting guest appearances are exciting enough, and the three issue mini she starred in (a celestial conspiracy thriller, in which she's wrongly accused of treason and sent to angel court) fair romped along. Later replaced by the essentially identical Tiffany, which says something.

Black Cat

A casual reading would assume the Black Cat – acrobatic, feline-themed cat-burglar with the hots for our troubled hero – to be a straight steal from Catwoman, in the Mighty Marvel tradition of Hawkeye (Green Arrow), Quicksilver (the Flash) et al. But no, says creator Marv Wolfman, who initially designed Felicia Hardy to be a Spider-Woman opponent, at the last minute introducing her to *Spider-Man* instead when his writing assignments changed. the real influence was *Bad Luck Blackie*, the famous Tex Avery cartoon. Well, maybe.

With her fur collars, plunging neckline and flirtations with mental illness, Felicia has some of the broken biscuit allure of Selina Kyle; bad news for sure, but flirtatious and bodacious enough that you can forgive Peter a few moments of weakness. Later additions – an ill-judged raped-at college element to her backstory, for one – rather ruin what should be a bouncy, lycra-clad take on the wild girl you know is bad for you, but can't leave alone.



Saturnyne

Alan Moore's *Captain Britain* run threw up a number of characters way more fascinating than their relatively brief number of appearances since would suggest, not least Opal Luna Saturnyne – actually created by the Dave Thorpe/Alan Davis team Moore gatecrashed to such effect in the early '80s. She remains one of the medium's most compelling, ambitious super-bitches.

Out of her depth but full of herself, Saturnyne's a cunning, ruthless, sexually manipulative space-Thatcher, seemingly unconcerned with whoever gets crushed by her attempts to do the right thing (as she sees it). Amongst the most prominent of her other-dimensional counterparts is the yet-more-evil Sat-Yr-9, a murdering Nazi-esque despot, recently seen as White Queen of the Hellfire Club. All Bad Girls have something of the domnatrix to them, but few rock it in quite such vertiginous Louboutins like Saturnyne in all her guises.

"All Bad Girls have something of the dominatrix in them, but few rock it in quite such vertiginous Louboutins"

27 26 25

Shi

London Night Studios, publisher of *Razor*, hitched its star to the '90s 'Bad Girls' boom like few others, but their most enduring character wasn't actually theirs at all: writer/artist William Tucci introduced 'Christian warrior monk' Shi – think a cross between a doll-faced geisha and Red Sonja – in *Razor Annual* #1, but swiftly whisked her off to his self-publishing venture, Crusade Comics, where *Shi: The Way Of The Warrior* ran for 12 issues plus a bunch of miniseries, and became popular enough to share inter company crossovers with *Daredevil*, *Vampirella* et al.

Shi was a highly sexualised Japanese-American avenging angel who slaughtered rapists and yakuza; swords, secret wars, oriental mythology, revenge and Catholic conscience make a heady, if unremarkable, brew, while the most original thing on display here was probably our heroine's favoured weapon, the naginata (basically a Japanese sword stuck on the end of a pole!

The Magdalena

The Magdalena didn't get her own ongoing series until 2010 but her spiritual home is at least 10 years previous, where her miniseries and guest-star appearances in *The Darkness*, *Witchblade*, *Tomb Raider*, *Vampirella* and others established her as a compelling supporting character, latest Catholic warrior nun in a bloodline stretching back to Sarah, Christ's daughter by Mary Magdalene, here depicted as His wife. Carrying the Spear of Destiny itself, and employed by 'the Inquisition' – a covert council of cardinals she comes across like a sexy stained glass window, her background packed with rape, Nazis and vampires.

Three different incarnations, broadly indistinguishable, appeared through Top Cow over the years: Sister Mariella, Sister Rosalita and Patience, a runaway who's been the reluctant incumbent since 2003. The Magdalena's been described as *Buffy* meets *The Da Vinci Code*, in her dreams, maybe.

Talia al Ghul

A key figure in the early '70s Neal Adams/Denny O'Neil 'bare-chested sex god' *Batman* incarnation, Talia was the alluring daughter of a new arch-villain – the immortal, environmentally-driven Middle Eastern super assassin Ra's al Ghul – who would grow into an equally intriguing character in her own right. Part victim, part love interest, part manipulative villainess, Talia needs no fancy weapons or swimsuit plus-boots outfit to be both more damaged, more dangerous and plain sexier than most other girls on this list – she's got cunning, skills, ruthlessness and drive on her side instead.

In recent years, under Grant Morrison, her perfectionist manipulations involving her son with Bruce Wayne, the violent (but perhaps not irredeemable) little shit Damian, have been fascinating – this is a truly Shakespearean femme fatale.

> *"The Magdalena's like a sexy stained glass window, her background packed with rape, Nazis and vampires"*

24

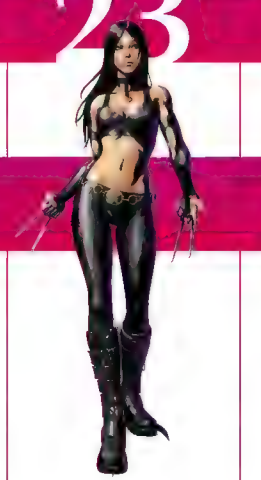
Madame Masque

For an A-list hero, Iron Man has always had a pretty ropey rogue's gallery, but a baddie that always had legs was the tragic gangland figure Whitney Frost, brought up an innocent East Coast blueblood but sucked into true father Count Nefaria's criminal Maggia empire in her *Gossip Girl* years, where she soon showed an aptitude for crime.

Hiding her damaged face – earned during a plane crash following a raid on some Stark lab – behind a gold mask, her career to date has exhibited a remarkable degree of flip-flop between arch-villainy and reluctant heroism, always underpinned by borderline-insanity and a romantic regard for Tony Stark.

The great Madame Masque story has yet to be written, but it always threatens; there's too much erotic tragedy in her make-up for it not to surface eventually.

23



X-23

With most new teen characters more miss than hit, the supremely unpromising concept behind X-23 – what if Wolverine was a teenage girl? – has had surprising stayability, this damaged clone copy spinning from the *X Men: Evolution* animated series into the comics themselves, where her tight-lipped, self-harming, occasionally homicidal brand of unnatural calm provides as decent a comic book reflection of genuine teen issues as anything since the basic puberty-equals-scary-weirdness equation of Marvel's mutants.

The issue, of course, is that cold and unemotional – if not handled with considerable skill – can soon turn into dull and distancing, something Marvel's failed to combat with sufficient consistency. Still, the potential for X-23 remains.

22

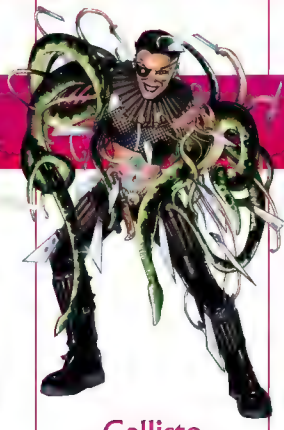
Poison Ivy

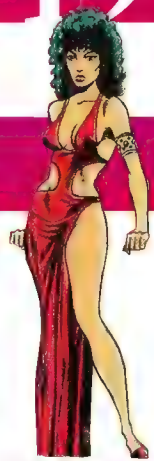
Instantly recognisable to the 'civilian' population, but rarely getting her fair crack in the comics, Pamela Isley is perhaps too original a female supervillain for many a creator to know quite what to do with: a sexpot, sure, but a supremely inaccessible one, for (to her mind) mammals are the bad guys, plants the heroes, and she'd happily see us all dead, frankly.

Sleepily Southern, chemically manipulative and utterly toxic, Poison Ivy has been troubling the Caped Crusader since the mid '60s (you'd think she'd been around for longer, so established is she in the Batvillain hierarchy), her prominence growing rapidly to replace an increasingly sympathetic Catwoman as Gotham's number one female foe. One of the few in the Batverse to display true superpowers, albeit of a vague and constantly shifting kind, she's currently a sort-of good girl in DC's New 52 timeline; don't expect this version to grow roots.

"To Poison Ivy's mind, mammals are the bad guys, plants the heroes, and she'd happily see us all dead, frankly"

21 20 19





Psylocke

Betsy Braddock – sister of Captain Britain, psychic one-time model-cum-pilot (yes, *that* classic combo) – is in many ways a completely crap character, pulled from pillar to post in multiple attempts to wring something compelling out of her: she's a goody-goody victim blinded by a villain, growing some (metaphorical) balls, racially mutated from British to Japanese, retro-fitted with kung fu assassin powers and (sometimes, depends on the writer) a libido that just won't quit. Oh yeah, and she was dead for about four years too.

What old Psylocke does have going for her, however, is pure babedom: Chun-Li's body and Elektra's fighting skills in a mash up with Emma Frost's hoity-toity old-world posh. Plus: a costume comprised entirely of purple dental floss.

Callisto

Named for the beautiful ancient Greek nymph, the mutant Callisto – lean, eye-patch sporting leader of the homeless 'Morlocks' hiding under Manhattan – is an unusual X-Men lass in that she's rarely depicted as stunningly beautiful, though this 'failing' has since become part of her tangled backstory; instead, she's been in the wars and shows it, a driven Ripley type more angel than demon but perhaps only just.

As with so many on this list, Callisto plays antagonist one minute, ally the next; though when we first saw her she'd captured Angel for sex-slave purposes, her key relationships are with other women – her rival Storm, her substitute daughter Marrow. If she's not a lesbian, then she's about the most unlikely straight chick in comics.

Fah Lo Suee

In Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* books, the Devil Doctor's daughter was a potent force in her own right, a junior criminal mastermind forever plotting to usurp her pop in the St-Fan and with an A* in betrayal. In *The Hands Of Shang Chi, Master Of Kung Fu*, sporadically the best comic of the '70s, Fah Lo Suee – always a nickname; we never learn her true identity – remained her father's daughter, but was now the innocent, entirely capable Shang Chi's older half-sister too.

More pragmatic than her father (read less obsessed with living forever and ruling the world), her alliances are fluid and unfathomable; initially depicted as pure villainess, she later becomes a new 'M' figure at MI-6 – her intentions appear noble, but experience ("Fooled again, little spirit," she once told her brother) tells us they're probably not.

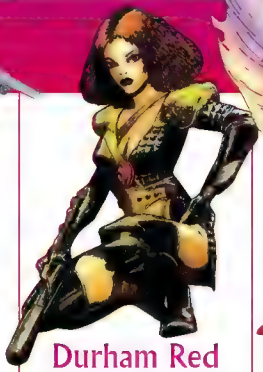
"Callisto's been in the wars and shows it, a driven Ripley-type more angel than demon – but perhaps only just"

18 17 16

Mystique

When such a big chunk of the X-Men's potency as symbol comes from the whole they-live-amongst-us-but-they're-not-us vibe, making one of your most compelling characters a literal shapeshifter who could be *anyone*, is either genius or way too on-the-nose obvious

But Raven Darkhölme (and with a real name like that, what chance did she have?) is such a graceful, self-confident supervillain we'll give her the benefit of the doubt – agendas and mysteries cling to her like one of her crop tops, and she may just prove to be on the side of the angels (no one could mistake her for one, mind) yet. An equal-opportunities shagger, she looks younger than her son, and once saved Britain from rule by Mosley's fascists: there are many more stories to be told about this one, that's for sure.



Durham Red

The name sounds like a chicken breed but *2000 AD*'s most enduring female hero - a sexy mutant vampire of the far future, originally created as Catwoman to Strontium Dog Johnny Alpha's Batman – has unexpectedly shapely legs, spinning off into a team strip, then her own story set a further 1,000 years into the future, where she's held in religious awe as a sort of saint of mutants.

Requiring blood to suck but lacking supernatural foibles (sunlight and such), she's an explorer and reluctant living messiah in a reignited, galaxy spanning war between humans and mutants; unusually, and rather thrillingly, she's rarely been defined by her relationships with the male characters around her. Rather, they're defined in relation to *her*

Zealot

She had her moment, did Zealot; maybe it's over now (she was last seen at length in a stillborn Grant Morrison revival of six years ago), but as the sexiest, most gleefully violent and arguably most visual of Jim Lee's WildC.A.T.s the alien fighting 'Covert Action Team' designed as his 'new X-Men' for the early '90s launch of Image Comics – she epitomises that era's 'Bad Girl' trend.

In a broad rewrite of Marvel's Kree-Skrull conflict, Lady Zannah was an aristocratic killer from the human-looking Kheruhim's 'Coda' all female warrior caste Captain Mar-Vell crossed with Wonder Woman, in Elektra's outfit. The tension (best shown in Alan Moore's run on the *'C.A.T.s*) comes from a late-in-the-day everything-I-believed-was-wrong realisation: suddenly, just before her time was up, this snooty murderer became a very interesting character indeed

> *"Agendas and mysteries cling to her like one of her crop tops, and she may just prove to be on the side of the angels yet"*

15

Harley Quinn

Few characters from other-media spin-offs – the rather hopeless Firestar is another one – become core elements of the original text, but the happily insane Harley Quinn (a psych doctor who acts like a little girl, dresses as a jester, speaks broad Brooklyn and kills with glee) is a classic example of a creation so strong she utterly bucks the trend

A throwaway gag from *Batman: The Animated Series* on TV (what if The Joker had a Robin-cum-girlfriend?), she soon hopped across to the comics and has been pretty much unstoppable since: her sexed up, skimpy costumed New 52 incarnation may be a misstep, but it's hard to think of a more immediately iconic new character either of the Big Two have come up with in the past quarter century.

14

Mohawk Storm

The original Storm of *Giant-Size X-Men #1* may have, in time, stolen Modesty Blaise's origin like the little pickpocket she'd once been, but in essence was pure good girl humble, shy, in touch with nature. More recent versions have been a goddess-queen, magnificent and a little unapproachable.

But somewhere in the middle there Storm went bad, stabbing Callisto in a knife fight and adopting a Kitty shocking punk look: black leathers, white mohawk, studded collar. This Storm shows hitherto unseen leadership skills, and counters an identity threatening depowering with harsh-but-effective decision-making and playful lesbian flirtations; many hated it, but for some amongst us this is the most fascinating Ororo has ever been.

13

Enchantress

Marvel's early days – some reports have him drawing over 1,000 pages a year! – were gruelling on Jack Kirby, but by the mid '60s he was concentrating efforts on his three favourite strips (*The FF, Cap, Thor*) and the quality leapt, on *Thor* it meant leaving Earth-bound superheroics for a time and venturing more to Asgard, where new allies and enemies awaited, not least super-seductress the Enchantress

No spun on a genuine Norse God, like Sif, Balder et al, this was an entirely new invention: a powerful, beautiful sorceress named Amora, part agent-of-Odin, part free-agent, all sexpot. Though she's played the supervillain role on Earth numerous times, it's as the viper-in-the-nest of Asgard (the original female Loki, if you will) that she's best used – sometimes hero, often villain, a potent embodiment of female sexual wiles at their most rampant.

"Harley Quinn acts like a little girl, dresses as a jester, speaks broad Brooklyn and kills with glee"

12 11 10

Witchblade

Witchblade is perhaps the most enduring tits 'n' ass Bad Girl from the early days of Image Comics. Tough, babelicious NY cop Sara Pezzini becomes a scantily-clad Buffy when she bonds with the titular 'Witchblade', a supernatural, sentient (apparently male and heterosexual!) armoured glove: ass-kicking follows. The supernatural weapon gives her spiky, bikini like body armour, as well as assorted blade weapons that appear when needed; gangsters and demons are amongst standard issue victims.

A concept with remarkable longevity – the comics are still running today, and there's been a TV spin-off, anime and manga versions, perhaps one day a film – it's always had fun dragging an unlikely array of historic women into the mix as past wielders, including Joan of Arc and Hua Mulan (yes, the one from the Disney film).

Jenny Sparks

The Authority – get-the-job-done-by-any-means heroes from an (initially) 12-issue series that reinvigorated superhero comics – was one of the most influential team books of recent times: without it we wouldn't have had *The Ultimates* or *The Avengers* movie, for starters. And at its heart was one of the most compelling bad girls the medium has ever seen. hard-drinking, hard-shagging, hard smoking Jenny Sparks, the foul-mouthed Brit broken biscuit in a Union Jack t-shirt who just happens to be 'the Spirit of the 20th Century' and a self appointed protector of the Earth.

Her team took on the world's greatest supervillain terrorist, invaders from another universe and, eventually, 'God' in ever-escalating, slam-bang, action movie-style adventures

Born on 1 January 1900, dying on 1 December 1999, she was humanity's defence mechanism, a figure whose moods and actions reflected the ages she lived through. Just possibly Warren Ellis' greatest creation.

Hit-Girl

To most, Hit-Girl is Chloe Moretz, aged about 12, splitting heads to the *Banana Splits* theme in Matthew Vaughn's movie version of *Kick-Ass*; to hardcore comic book readers she's younger (maybe 10?), even more vicious and disturbed, and considerably less sexualised – the breakout star of Mark Millar and John Romita Jr's creator-owned smash hit comic version of the property, since earning starring roles in the sequel and her own spin-off book

A take on the junior pro-athlete, trained by obsessive parents from a young age to the exclusion of all else - except this one's built to dismember gangsters, not do well on the tennis court or balance beam – she's a figure designed to provoke: should we cheer her, be scandalised by her, pity her, or what? Hit-Girl's the product of a Batman-wannabe father who trains his little darling to be a ruthless killer; a Bad Girl to make us feel queasy and uncomfortable, to inspire a raft of feminist tracts, and to blatantly steal the spotlight every time she appears.

"Hard-drinking, hard-shagging, hard-smoking Jenny Sparks, the foul-mouthed Brit broken biscuit"

Modesty Blaise

Modesty shouldn't really be on this list – she's primarily a star of novels and newspaper strips – but the thing is, she insisted. And quite right, for this freelance agent of British Intelligence, with her origins as a post-WW orphan, youth spent running a Tangier's gang that grew into the international outfit 'The Network', and very personal morality, is too intriguing, too influential a figure to leave out.

Retired to London with her platonic right-hand-man Willie Garvin – think a young, two-fisted Michael Caine – she relieves the boredom by taking on 'capers' for HM Government, armed with wits, skills, determination and silent little weapons like throwing knives (Willie) and the 'kongo' (Modesty), a small martial arts club.

Motives, if not methods, are always on the side of right these days, but Modesty – with her mysteries, her exoticism, her gangster background, her rich sexuality and array of skin-tight black fighting outfits – is a major part of the well from which many of the other, lesser Bad Girls in this list draw.

Dark Phoenix

"Hear me, X-Men! No longer I am the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever, I am Phoenix!"

Blimey; she knew how to make an entrance did this new incarnation of everyone's childhood sweetheart, original X-Man Jean Grey.

Was the original 'Dark Phoenix Saga' the greatest superhero story ever written? It certainly makes the shortlist and not least because of the towering bad girl at the heart of it – good girl Jean, with her red hair and short skirts, now grown strong and dramatic and sexual and, oh yes, world-threatening too.

Jean was the comic book Marilyn, both better than human and more vulnerable, not of this world but one of us entirely, a superstar death-goddess in blood-red spandex. We couldn't have guessed her moon-suicide (nor could her creators!), but one thing had been clear from the start: this couldn't end well.

We're left echoing Scott, collapsed on the floor. "Oh, Jean," we whimper, "Jean…"

Lady Death

With most hit characters, even the most derivative, it's easy to see why so many people like them, not so with Lady Death, an enduring Bad Girl from the early '90s boom who remains with us, despite an entirely unappealing visual – white skin, big hair, long gloves, knickers – and baffling characterisation; she's a goth's dream of a Victoria's Secret model posing as sadistic, demonic would be world destroyer, later softened into a strange sort of anti-heroine.

Originally we were told Lady Death began as an innocent teen in medieval Sweden, she's revealed to have angel blood, is saved from burning at the stake by a demon and, once in Hell, usurps Lucifer. Debuting as an apparent hallucination in the *Evil Ernie* comics, her early series' Hammer Horror-style machinations were always secondary to the fetish gear and clunky pin-up poses.

As perhaps the least appealing heroine ever to become an enduring hit, and certainly the only one to sport a skull on her fanny, she's in some ways our ultimate 'Bad' Girl.

"Jean was the comic book Marilyn… a superstar death-goddess in blood-red spandex"

6

Black Widow

She has all the proper 'spy girl' credentials – Russian secret service background, slinky black catsuit, troubled past, lost loves, conflicted loyalties – yet Black Widow has conspicuously failed to headline an ongoing series of her own in the getting-towards-50-now years that we've known her.

Originally created by Stan Lee and Don Heck as an Iron Man villain, she began as a civilian clothed foreign agent before earning her first BW costume and high-tech weapons, soon she was defecting, fighting Spider-Man in her new black skin tights, and bouncing from shortlived solo strips to co-starring with Daredevil and leading The Champions.

Natasha Romanoff later, annoyingly, revealed to be 'really' called Natalia Romanova, okay, Lee may have got Russian naming conventions wrong, but we're traditionalists) has occasionally been depicted as simpering and confused - we're largely looking at the DD years here - but at her best is one of the most decisive, capable women in the Marvel Universe.

5

Red Sonja

Conan would tell her off for wearing too-skimpy armour (the actions of a girl, not a woman, he claimed) but Sonja didn't care. The Hyborian bruiser was useful to her, a fellow mercenary, but she's always been the fiercely independent type and they'd come to blows almost as often as they'd stand back-to-back, fending off this horde or that.

The 'She-Devil with a Sword' took her name from a 1934 Robert E Howard short story, but in every other way is a from-whole-cloth Roy Thomas/Barry Windsor-Smith creation for the early '70s *Conan* comics – beautiful, fiery, a hot red-head with the 'thief, reaver, slayer' personal morality of the sullen-eyed Cimmerian himself.

Popular guest appearances in Conan's books led to her own series by 1975, but following the failed '80s film her popularity tailed off, allowing Dynamite to grab the rights for a (highly successful) 2005 relaunch.

Okay, in the current series continuity has gone slightly askew, but the Hyborian Age slaughter continues pretty much unabated, and there remains but one head girl at the school of vicious, voluptuous female barbarians.

4

Vampirella

She's the last survivor of the vampire planet Drakulon – or she's the daughter of Lilith (rejected first wife of Adam in the Jewish texts). In all incarnations, though, she's possessor of the skimpiest, yet most stylish costume in comics – adding an endearing splash of Cinecittà Italian chic to what might otherwise be considered tackily titillating Bad Girl garb.

Created by Forrest J Ackerman to play hostess (and sometimes star) in a late '60s black-and-white anthology, Vampi's look was designed by feminist underground comix legend (and one-time *Wonder Woman* artist) Trina Robbins – who, much later, would call Mike Deodato's take on the Amazon Princess a 'barely clothed hypersexual pin up'.

Vampirella's immortal, can turn into a bat, has superhuman strength and speed, needs blood to survive – but holy water doesn't trouble her, nor crosses or sunlight. Some great artists (her first cover was by Frank Frazetta) and pneumatic models (of the Julie Strain type) have depicted Vampirella over the years, but if her stories have rarely been spectacular, there's always been something endearing about the girl herself – and she's certainly difficult to ignore.

> ***"There remains but one head girl at the school of vicious, voluptuous female barbarians"***

Emma Frost

For some years now – while written well, at least – she's been the most entertaining, compelling female character in comics: a snob, a manipulator, an ex-villain not of Black Widow proportions (the honourable warrior who just happens to be on the wrong side, all of that), but a one-time serious Big Bad now turned to the side of right. Because, for now, it suits her.

That Emma mixes East Coast society ice maiden standoffishness with some of the most nastily va-va-voom costumes in comics adds to the potent mix: this is posh totty at absolutely its most dangerous, and you completely understand why Cyclops and others feel lust, repulsion, love and fear, all at once. She's the comic book world's headiest brew.

Emma Frost, White Queen of the Hellfire Club, hit *Uncanny X Men* in its glory years. The Claremont/Byrne team had already given us a range of compelling variations on their basic 'mutant goddess' theme: the mother (Storm), the daughter (Kitty), the wife (Jean Grey). Now they were toying with making Jean evil, perhaps against her will – but what if a similar goddess was introduced, one that simply *enjoyed* being bad? Thus it was with Emma Frost, gunning embodiment of a range of more negative female roles: temptress, deceiver, dominatrix, bondage queen, cruel teacher and bad friend longing to lead you off the rails.

Many villains don't transfer to hero-hood all that convincingly, but not so with Emma, as a good guy she retains her sly sense of humour, her creepy attitudes, the neat way she muxes funny with fearsome even as she fights our battles. Maybe one day she'll go back to pure villainy, but it would be a mistake – the best Bad Girls aren't pure *anything*, they keep us guessing, and right now Emma Frost is consistently the best Bad Girl of them all.

Elektra

Elektra Natchios, Matt 'Daredevil' Murdock's college sweetheart turned unstoppable ninja assassin, may not be the most original character in the world, but damn, she's about the most influential. Without her, this issue – and this list – wouldn't exist, for the late '80s/early-'90s obsession with ninjas and ultra-violence, grim and gritty New York street scenes, creator-owned characters, vicious female leads and pin-up art, is all intrinsically tied up with Elektra and the electrical charge her debut fired through the medium.

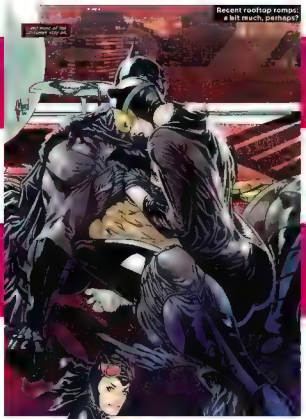
Further, the 1981 creation of Elektra didn't just catapult Frank Miller to stardom, or rescue *Daredevil* from staring down the barrel of the cancellation gun; it pretty much saved comics themselves. Inspired by Miller's heady Elektra-centric brew (and, demonstrating a very different sensibility, the work of British import Alan Moore), comics as a medium started to get interesting again.

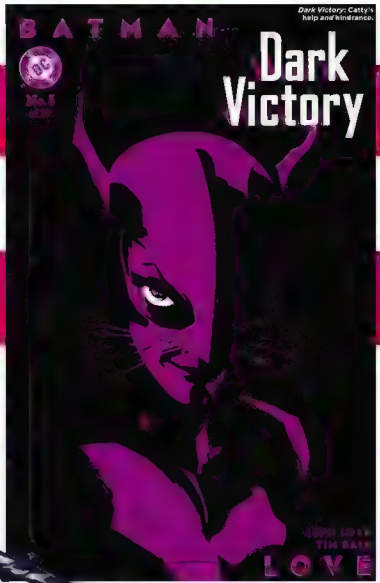
Following her resurrection at the climax to Miller's run, we started to learn both more and less about this damaged woman – this Greek bigwig's daughter with the shadow in her childhood and her attempts to do good constantly perverted and collapsing – in Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz's spectacular, hallucinatory *Elektra Assassin* miniseries.

Realising that to explain too much is to damage the character, Miller painted her here as a mythic, almost supernatural figure, constantly you're left wondering what's real and what's imagined, and just how damaged the competing narrative voices on display actually are.

Subsequent outings have been less satisfying, mostly because her story is told: actions should have consequences, and Elektra is ill-suited to the constant reset button that allows so many comic book icons to survive. Bloody hell, though: she had some impact. Briefly, when she mattered, nothing else in comics counted for more.

"The 1981 creation of Elektra didn't just catapult Frank Miller to stardom, it pretty much saved comics"

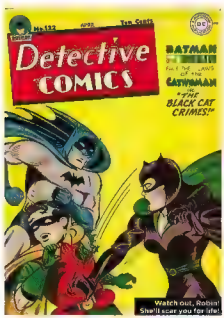




Dark Victory: Catty's help and hinderance.

1 CATWOMAN

Of course, there was only ever going to be one winner...



Catwoman isn't only the dominant bad girl, she's effortlessly the sexiest – there's a not-trying-too-hard quality to her that's endlessly appealing – and certainly the only woman on this list with everyone-knows-her-name recognition. Couple this with Selina Kyle's engaging, easy-to-understand personality, and whisper it she may just be the greatest female character in comics.

(Madness, you say? Then who are her rivals? Only Wonder Woman is similarly famous, and nobody seems quite sure *what* she is: peace envoy or warrior? Hetero bondage-sub or Amazonian lesbian icon? Hell, it's not always clear what her basic powers are – like, say, whether or not she can fly. In stark contrast, *everybody* gets what Catty's all about.)

Part of Selina's appeal comes from the fact that she's complicated *and* obvious, both at once. Obvious, because of course it comes down to sex – doesn't everything? – and few promise a good time like a cheeky jewel thief: perennial tease, hopeless flirt, she's a girl who just wants to have fun. Complicated, because – by any normal standards – she's the bad guy; because her relationship with Batman, however frisky, must always be fraught with mistrust, because we dream to be like she is – just do what we want, when we want and damn the consequences – but we're pretty sure it wouldn't be such a great idea.

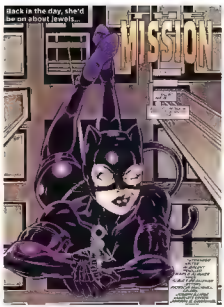
You can stitch troubled backgrounds to Catwoman as much as you like (indeed, they add a certain frisson – everyone loves the clown who's crying inside), but crucial to this girl's shtick is the idea that she's enjoying herself, that her eyes are forever flicking around the room for something new and shiny to fix upon, and that (if you're lucky) she might briefly share with you their wicked, greedy little glint.

Male or female, good or bad, you know you'd have an amazing time whenever you hang out with Selina Kyle.

CRUCIALLY, CATWOMAN ISN'T JUST for guys: girls get her too. And the reason isn't hard to see: she likes what they tend to like* – jewels and treats and looking good.

The thigh-length boot scene has its fans...

...but black rubber is Selina's best look



...but current versions have other desires

¡Hey, how many of us are really motivated by revenge?! And she takes no crap: she knows slogging through the daily grind is for mugs, and that all over black works every time, in every situation (Anna Wintour would surely approve). Okay, so she's a sexual predator – slightly worrying – and she might just steal your boyfriend, but at least she's no snob; many women react badly to Keira Knightly, say, because they think she'll be all snooty, act like she's too good for them. Selina, they know, would share a bottle of wine - then head out to the store to pinch another one.

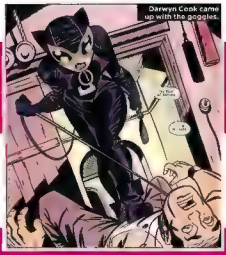
"Male or female, good or bad, you know you'd have an amazing time with Selina Kyle"

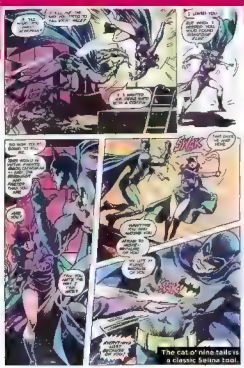
IF THE BAT-VILLAINS ARE ALL LIVING embodiments of one disorder or another, then Catwoman is some form of adrenaline-junkie's kleptomania; she steals stuff because she can, and for the thrill of the taking, not because she needs the damn things. (How often do we see her actually *wear* a pearl necklace?) It's another reason many women identify with her; they're constantly bombarded in *Grazia* and the Sunday supps with the rich and beautiful endlessly consuming crazily expensive items no normal person could afford. Catwoman says, 'I'll just take them, thanks' – she pounces on a so-called 'feminine vice' like 'immoderate sartorial display' – even a specific crime, like shoplifting – and makes it sexy.

When she's presented as a gang boss it seems like a game; we've gatecrashed a role she's playing short-term and for giggles, and her syndicate will surely collapse as soon as lack of interest sets in, and her wandering eye alights elsewhere. Nothing's completely serious to dear old Selina: she runs from Batman only because he'll chase her – if you can catch me, maybe you can have me, she seems to be saying – which is one reason why the recent rooftop couplings in Catwoman's own comic read so badly. They're too graphic, too tasteless, but (more importantly) where on does earth it give them to go?

Over the years Catwoman's become a feminist icon – of sorts – but that's not exactly the place she was born. "I felt that women were feline creatures," Bob Kane, creator of Batman, once offered, "and men were more like dogs. While dogs are faithful and friendly, cats are cool, detached and unreliable. Cats are as hard to understand as women are." »

All images DC Comics





Catwoman is a rebel, but an essentially selfish one, she's got no real mission, no agenda, beyond simply entertaining herself. She's naughty because to play by the rules is boring. Though Selina has more than a whiff of the bonkers about her – her fragrance is surely Madness by Chopard – she wears it lightly; emotionally unruffled and boundlessly confident, she's what passes for normal for Gotham.

Poison Ivy – essentially her replacement in the Batman rogue's gallery – wants to seduce and obliterate the Dark Knight; Selina teases him, dances with him – and, most of the time, the worst she might leave him with is a deep, property-marking scratch. (Her claws are mostly sheathed, sometimes playfully deployed, you feel, and only relatively rarely used in real anger – and then in self-defence, her way out of a tight corner. Selina's no Wolverine, and when the '70s Catwoman was written as homicidal – it's happened much less lately, thank goodness – it plays completely wrong.)

AS WITH OTHER COMIC BOOK GREATS

Every generation gets the Catwoman it deserves. When first introduced in 1940, she was a straight-up jewel thief in evening wear, a throwaway antagonist called 'The Cat'. Rather than climbing buildings, she'd dress as an old woman ("Nice legs," Batman spotted! to help commit her crimes; infamously, Batman countered her 'Let go of me' protests with a classic line: "Quiet, or papa spank!"

Her competence was in question too; she'd gained a furry cat mask and a new name by *Batman #3*, but it would be some considerable time before she'd earned a proper costume or learned to make a reliable getaway.

It was with the '60s TV show that Selina really gatecrashed the public consciousness: Julie Newmar, Lee Meriwether (for the 1966 spin-off film) and Eartha Kitt preened and purred, men their playthings. Though they played the same villain of the week role as the Joker, Penguin et al, this Selina was never totally villainous – a cheeky, but perhaps redeemable, thief.

Michelle Pfeiffer's version, in Tim Burton's *Batman Returns*, was a very different beast, the emotionally damaged S&M-clad victim of a crushing Patriarchy. Her chemistry was

...someone, or maybe it are a cowardly and superstitious lot
...which, now that I think about it, is pretty much the very thing that so incenses Harvey
...Alone...?

Snatched moments: *the best* Bat-romance.

A few hours passing from thunder and lightning to sweltering heat can wreak havoc on a girl's hair
Do you think a trim would help?
Purple lightbulbs: a must at Selina's pad.

Buttocks: prominent in many a Cat-fight.

forced with Michael Keaton's Bruce, but she was perfectly capable of stealing – in perhaps her greatest ever heist the show from him completely. (By film's end he's sitting at home minding her kitty, while Selina prowls the night's rooftops alone.)

The '90's bad girl boom saw the comic version sexualised and posing, her impractical thigh-length boots and tottering heels specifically designed to avoid the stitched-together Pfeiffer look; artist Jim Balent stole the purple colour scheme from her earliest versions, added the gloves and boots too – but this take was so unforgiving it almost ruined the character as a genuine fancy dress option for most real women.

Elsewhere, different Catwomen emerged. Halle Berry's disastrous movie misstep had, nevertheless, something interesting about it; behind the six-heavy superheroics, this was a genuine pop culture parable – The Devil Wears Spandex about the options open to girls in modern world, and how a timid and retiring woman might play by the rules and still lose.

Lately, Catwoman's looked her best ever. in *Batman: The Animated Series* she was cute and capable in grey; in the comics themselves she gained her ultimate costume, a Darwyn Cook/Ed Brubaker thing that combines the slink with practical aspects of a real cat-burglar outfit. A grittier, more realistic take, it nevertheless retained its sense of fun, part Emma Peel, part Enemy Ace – all chunky boots, SPAD pilot goggles and slippery rubbery goodness. Just sexy enough, just practical enough; like Baby Bear's porridge, it's exactly right.

Right now, in the comics, the New 52 keeps her best look, but rather overdoes other aspects, suddenly it appears as if Bruce is letting Catwoman break the law and get away with it not for romance, or old times' sake, but in return for violent sex their shagging is 'a lot like a bar fight,' she says in voiceover. Someone, somewhere, obviously thinks this is a good idea.

SELINA'S THE ONE CAREER CRIMINAL

Batman never quite catches – from her very first appearance he seemed to deliberately let her get away – and they've been dancing around each other for the 70 years since. Is she in dire need of an authority figure to put her back on the beaten track? That's what Batman thinks and what she wants him to think. Alone amongst his foes, the Cat brings out the human in him; she reminds him of the second part of his name and bonkers though she may (or may not) be, she helps keep him sane.

Meanwhile, every time that cat you've got purring happily on your lap suddenly goes for your fingers, you're reminded of Selina and how she makes her own rules. **CH**

**Willing to accept this terrible sweeping generalisation? Hope so!*

20 REASONS WE CAN'T WAIT FOR THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

Never let it be said that we're not an enthusiastic bunch here at *Comic Heroes* – here's a score of reasons why we can barely contain ourselves for the big-screen return of Gotham's finest... By Rob Power

1 This is the end...

It's the end of an era, a golden age for Batman films that has broken new ground and proven beyond doubt that superheroes can achieve amazing things at the box office. If – and it's a big if – *The Dark Knight Rises* wraps things up as well as we all hope it can, we'll have...

2 The trilogy of trilogies?

There has yet to be a truly great superhero trilogy – in fact, there are precious few genuinely top-tier trilogies in the whole of cinematic history – making the prospect of a set of Batman films that could stand the test of time nothing short of thrilling.

3 The magnificent Nolan

He's the man with the plan who single-handedly resurrected Batman and set the bar for superhero movies. With a track record of beguilingly brilliant films behind him, we're willing to bet that *The Dark Knight Rises* could just be his best yet.

4 Is the joke on us?

For most fans, the Joker is the definitive Batman villain and Heath Ledger's incredible performance in *The Dark Knight* is going to take some beating. With that in mind, *The Dark Knight Rises* is going to have to be pretty damned special if it's going to satisfactorily round things off.

5 Dressed to kill

Sharpened stilettos, military-grade breathing apparatus and a Bat-suit straight out of a fetishist's wet dream – there's no doubting that *The Dark Knight Rises* is set to be a visual treat. And exactly how is Anne Hathaway going to manage to look sexy and dangerous in those shoes?

6 The Bat breaker

Let's face it, Tom Hardy looks seriously terrifying as Bane. The bulk, the costume, the menacing (and hopefully audible) voice – if he can deliver, we could be looking at Batman's scariest big-screen adversary yet.

7 Reality check

We've seen Bane and Catwoman on the big screen before, but never within the confines of a world as rooted in reality as this. We can't wait to see how Nolan manages to breathe life into this pair.

8 Believe the hype

There aren't many directors who can deal with the crushing weight of expectation, and finishing a trilogy of this quality was always going to be tough, but we've got a feeling that Nolan might just have his best Bat-film yet waiting for us.

9 Trailer torment

If they're willing to show a collapsing football pitch and a plane hijack in the trailer, what could the rest of the film possibly hold? Working on the (admittedly flawed) assumption that the best is yet to come, our imagination is going into action-sequence overdrive.

10 A brave new Bat

Silly voice aside, Christian Bale has been a brilliant Batman, but now his time is up we get the excitement of a new face in the cowl. We'll also get to see a new big-screen direction for the Bat – will it be a return to high-camp? A continuation of Nolan's gritty take? Time will tell...

11 Flight of fantasy

In a world of realism, where every bit of the Bat costume had a reason to exist, does *this* Batmobile look like a step too far? The challenge for Nolan will be to see if he can make a flying car fit into that universe – and not look like something out of *Star Wars*.

12 Street-fighting men

If the trailers are anything to go by, the action stakes appear to have been raised considerably, and frankly who doesn't want to see Batman and the good folks of Gotham facing off against Bane and his cronies in an enormous street battle?

13 Return of the Cat

Michelle Pfeiffer was unhinged, Halle Berry just plain rubbish. [illegible] will be interesting to see how Nolan brings Catwoman to life, especially as he's also admitted to being 'nervous' about including her in the film.

14 Gordon's alive

Or is he? The trailers so far have all hinted at disaster for Bruce Wayne and his nearest and dearest, with Gordon lying in a hospital bed. Jim Gordon or Lucius Fox seem like logical choices for the chop, or even...

15 Bye bye Batman?

By all accounts, Nolan has known how he's going to end his trilogy since he began, and with things looking bleak for Bats, just how far will he go? Is the director brave enough to go all-out and *kill* Gotham's finest?

16 Miller time

Frank Miller's take on Batman has been a huge inspiration to Nolan's trilogy, and with internet speculation about the finale heating up, we can't help but wonder how far that connection goes. Could we see a finale pilfered from the end of *The Dark Knight Returns*?

17 Justice for all

In the wake of Marvel's *Avengers Assemble* conquering the box office, the temptation for DC now must be to make a full-on Justice League film. The idea of a super-team never quite fitted with the Nolan Bat-verse, but now surely the way is clear...

18 Hey Joe

Christopher Nolan clearly loves Joseph Gordon-Levitt, but who exactly *is* John Blake? Could he be some form of proto-Robin and potential Nightwing, or perhaps even a replacement for Bruce Wayne himself?

19 Ra's returns

We know Liam Neeson is back as Ra's Al Ghul, and we can't wait to see how the League Of Shadows makes its presence felt. Here's hoping they're something other than flashback fodder.

20 Self-raising Bat?

How exactly will Batman rise? The imagery of the film thus far all looks decidedly doom-laden, so the question is where will Bruce Wayne's salvation come from? Knowing Christopher Nolan, the answer is likely to be anything but straightforward.

MAD, BAD & DANGEROUS TO KNOW

It's back-breaking work taking out the Batman but Bane makes light going of it. With *The Dark Knight Rises* thrusting this 'dark Doc Savage' back into the spotlight, we try to work out what makes the character tick... **By Matt Bielby**

Bane, that most polarising of Batman bad guys, is about to take a firm, Venom-powered grip on the public consciousness, already, cosplayers are rocking up in big coats and metallic muzzles, while the can-you-or-can't-you? debate on the audibility of Tom Hardy's performance as this Latino muscle-mountain in *The Dark Knight Rises* continues to rage.

He's a striking visual alright; very different to the lithe Jokers and Riddlers we usually put up against the bulky Dark Knight. (Indeed, artists are suddenly forced to depict Batman in lean Neal Adams terms whenever Bane's in town.) But is he a villain we love? 'No' is probably the answer and there are some obvious reasons why...

First off, there's the era he's associated with: the grim '90s, when all the industry-reinvigorating joy of *Daredevil* and *Watchmen*, *Swamp Thing* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* turned to so much moody, flashy, violent tripe. Right in the middle of this mess – Marvel sucker-punched by the new Image Comics, and DC already confused and reeling – came a parade of giant, often badly-drawn men with huge muscles and cardboard personalities: Cable and Doomsday, Prime and Stryfe. And Bane: right there, looking ridiculous, in the middle of them all.

And there's another reason many fail to warm to Bane: his extreme competence. Not content with making this new Big Bad extremely strong and highly aggressive, they had to make him a world-class genius too: a tactical whizz, master of a half-dozen languages... It gives him something of the whiff of a Mary-Sue, those (usually) fan-created characters thrown into the middle of an established universe where they're too perfect, too dominant, too unlikely to exist.

And yet Bane endures, strong enough to survive humiliating character left-turns and 'walk-on thug' guest-appearances [hi, Joel Schumacher!] alike. He must have something, but what?

ON THE SURFACE OF IT, THIS IS: not an exciting character, an ugly, Image-style bruiser powered by green gloop pumped directly into his addicted brain. It makes him strong, but not Superman strong – or even (to hop universes a moment) Spider-Man strong. But he *is* stronger than Batman, in the same way Hulk Hogan is (I'm guessing here) stronger than most readers of *Comic Heroes*. It's enough to make him formidable, sure, but surely no more so than Killer Croc, so far, we're unimpressed. [And hey, if all it takes to beat Bruce is someone who can bench-press a little more than he can – well, we've been wasting the past 70 years reading his comics.]

Quite who should take prime responsibility for Bane is a moot point. But Denny O'Neil, long-time Batman scribe [and, in the early '90s, group editor of the books] is clearly a prime suspect. After all, it's he who'd first introduced both the designer drug Venom – a highly-addictive, strength-enhancing steroid – and Bane's largely unpleasant stomping ground of Santa Prisca [think Cuba with added drug dealers]. The whole back-breaking modus operandi is pure O'Neil too, for whatever reason he seems to have been obsessed by this sort of trauma in the '90s, with Batgirl, *Daredevil*'s Heather

Above: Why doesn't he pick on someone his own size...?

and *Green Lantern*'s Carol all suffering similarly at his hands.

Also guilty: Chuck Dixon, who wrote the character's first appearance, in *Batman: Vengeance Of Bane*, with art by frequent collaborator Graham Nolan; Doug Moench, as the other key creator of the 'Knightfall' storyline; and DC high-up Paul Levitz, who loved chucking extreme trauma at DC heroes [Superman killed, Green Lantern loopy] as much as he loved the Big Continuity Event. Together they'd conceived 'Knightfall', the giant-sized Batman epic to run through 10 titles for 71 [count 'em!] issues, starting with *Batman #492* [April 1993], at the climax of which Bane would 'break the Bat'. In the context of the times, a thumping great monster like this one surely made a lot of sense.

Though his look is that of the stereotypical dumb powerhouse, Bane was, from the start, intended to be highly capable in *every* area: a dark twin to pulp hero Doc Savage, who was

Above: Ouch. Bane's signature back-breaking move.

surgeon, scientist, explorer, adventurer and on and on, the 'perfect man'. Indeed, Bane's gang – with him from the Pena Dura prison-break in Santa Prisca – are based on key members of 'the Fabulous Five', Savage's band of helpers; amusingly (or stupidly: you decide) the key ones are named Trogg, Zombie and Bird, echoing both the good Doctor's Monk, Ham and Renny and three classic '60s rock bands.

Though clearly a capable chap in his own right – brought up in a tough jail, where he was forced from childhood to serve out his revolutionary father's life sentence – Bane's threat comes not from all those languages or his ruthless prison morality, but from the drug addiction he gains through nasty, Luke Cage-style prison experiments. Venom had, apparently, killed all other test subjects, but Bane it makes strong and determined. They've created a monster, and escape is only a matter of time.

PERHAPS THE MOST BAFFLING part of the whole Bane story is quite how and why he gets a mad-on for Batman: he's never met the guy, never been harmed by him, never even visited the US. But he's heard stories about Gotham's defender in prison, and become fascinated by the idea that Batman rules his city through fear; this, it seems, is a challenge to test himself against. Also: dreams of a demonic bat have haunted Bane's nights since childhood – either a smart predestination thing, or a dumb add-on to ensure a collision between the two characters (again: you decide).

> **“ Venom makes Bane strong – and determined ”**

Eventually Bane's tactical nous comes through, as he formulates a simple but workable plan, one utilised in a number of effective comics. Put simply, it goes like this: knacker the hero out by forcing him to fight everyone at once, then deliver the coup de grace. Thus Bane smashes the walls of Arkham, gets the Dark Knight all flustered trying to stuff the Joker, Two-Face, the Riddler and the rest back inside, then ambushes him back at Wayne Manor's Batcave and there beats him into submission. The whole thing's like prison rape, the spine-snapping its grizzly climax.

And that, as far as the important stuff is concerned, is where it ends. Bane's downfall was less satisfying: physically beaten by the unstable Batman-replacement Jean-Paul Valley/Azrael, using an armoured exoskeleton. His Venom pumps slashed, Bane collapsed into withdrawal as Azrael did his worst.

Since then, Bane's floated around the edges of the Bat-verse, occasionally depicted as bizarrely sympathetic; he once helped Batman against Venom-lite dealers, spent ages searching for his missing father (four possibilities reveal themselves – yes, it's basically *Mamma Mia!*), and for a while joined Ra's al Ghul as his heir. In later, just as unlikely, developments he returned to the back-breaking, become a champion of democratic elections, bantered with the likes of Catman on the subject of love – and attempted to murder Batgirl and others.

Currently, in the New 52, a rebooted Bane has shown up in *Batman: The Dark Knight* by Paul Jenkins and David Finch, this version's still fighting his Venom addiction, pimping a new Venom/Fear Toxin mash-up that's sending crims into a super-strong violence frenzy, and basically been booted back to right where he started. We still don't think he's any good as a villain, truth be told, but we have to admire the endurance.

Expect more from him – perhaps *much* more – if *The Dark Knight Rises* is anything like the hit we all expect it to be. Who knows! This movie may be where it all clicks into place for the big guy… **[HZ]**

***The Dark Knight Rises** hits UK cinemas on 20 July: getting your ears syringed before seeing it may be a wise precaution.*

BATMAN DYNAMIC DUOS

Welcome to the world of the Bat team-up, where Bruce Wayne's brooding alter-ego is happy to hang out with anyone, from Judge Dredd to the Hulk, Sherlock Holmes to Tarzan, to get the job done. (Whether Christmas cards are exchanged afterwards, however, is not on record.) **By James Lovegrove**

Brave, meet Bold: it's Bat team-up a go-go!

Batman: the Caped Crusader, the Dark Knight, one-man scourge of evildoers. A lone figure perched atop a Gotham skyscraper, peering out keenly over the city he has sworn to protect. A vigilante detective waging a private war against scum and villainy.

That's the image we most commonly have of Bob Kane's great creation and Batman's solitariness has become an integral part of his mystique. It appeals to the loner in all of us that here is someone so damaged, so driven, that he has forsaken the consolations of society and transformed himself into a creature apart, a human machine of justice. He operates solo because there is nobody else like him: nobody else has the commitment and few can match his prowess.

It's not entirely so, of course. Batman – for such an aloof, alienated character – has often seemed a surprisingly gregarious chap. For starters, there's his extensive 'Bat-family' – a near-endless parade of Bat-copyists that started in 1940, barely a year after Batman first appeared, with the arrival of his more-or-less permanent companion, Robin. Several youngsters have worn the Boy Wonder's domino mask and dodgy shorts: Dick Grayson, the ill fated Jason Todd, Tim Drake and, most recently, Bruce Wayne's own son, Damian – and all have added a different flavour to the myth, as well as fulfilled the crucial function of giving our hero someone to talk to.

BUT ROBIN IS ONLY THE START. BEYOND HIM THERE'S THE plethora of distaff Bat-people: at least three Batgirls, two Batwomen and the Huntress, a Bat-lady in all but name. All have assisted Batman in some capacity or other through the years, while even sometime-enemy Catwoman may be considered an honorary Bat-associate, at least at times. (Sure, she plagued Batman's life as an out-and-out villainess initially, but her later depiction as a morally ambiguous love-interest-cum-sparring-partner has been more enduring.)

Mention should also be made of Alfred Pennyworth, loyal butler; Lucius Fox, business manager; Commissioner Gordon, rule-bending cop buddy; and even Ace the Bat-hound, faithful Bat-pet and comedy classic, in his little domino mask. This is one Lone Ranger who sure has a lot »

All images © DC Comics

of Tontos. Beyond the Bat-book supporting players, Batman has interacted continually with characters from the wider DC Universe too – and with heroes from further afield. He's a fully paid-up member of the Justice League and has headed up a super-squad of his own, the Outsiders. Not only that, he's been a stalwart of the team-up scene since the early '50s, regularly forging temporary alliances with the good, the bad, the ugly – and, often as not, the just plain weird.

IT ALL BEGAN WITH WORLD'S FINEST COMICS, DEBUTING

in 1941. The new title was a 96-page quarterly anthology, every issue featuring one adventure starring Superman and another starring Batman, with both heroes shown consorting merrily on the cover. The format was a sound commercial decision – DC's two big names in a single comic, backed up by a variety of other strips featuring lesser luminaries – but when, in 1954, the company was forced to reduce page counts on economic grounds, the fateful decision was made to amalgamate the Superman and Batman stories.

From issue #71 onwards the pair became inseparable, romping through a series of gimmicky escapades most often involving aliens, time travel, magic and increasingly insane 'imaginary' scenarios.

Bruce Wayne here is very much the larky, gadget-mad Batman of the times, with Superman as his well-muscled, chisel-chinned foil. Both play to type: Bats does rudimentary detecting, while Superman can always be relied on to perform some feat of Kryptonian might as required.

Characters from both heroes' supporting casts pop their heads round the door frequently, but perhaps the most interesting and enjoyable episodes are these aforementioned 'imaginary' tales (what we'd now call 'Elseworld' or 'What If?' stories), which muck about with the status quo for fun. In one, a young Bruce Wayne is adopted by Ma and Pa Kent, so Batman and Superman grow up as stepbrothers; in another, the two heroes have sons.

World's Finest Comics, which ran for 323 issues until cancellation in 1986, did all it could to erase the differences – beyond the usefully visual – between the two superheroes; certainly, there was minimal tension between the grudge-nursing avenger and the world's biggest boy scout. Being true to neither, however, this couldn't last and so the 1990 prestige-format miniseries revival *World's Finest* plays wonderfully on the characters' dissimilarities. Written by Dave Gibbons and drawn by Steve Rude, it pays homage to the Silver Age Bats/Supes strips, while also being a witty and engaging study in contrasts. Rude, channelling Dick Sprang as well as his usual Jack Kirby, depicts Gotham City as a seedy Gothic hell and Metropolis as an Apollonian Art Deco heaven. Gibbons, for his part, pulls off a neat trick by having the two heroes swap locations in order to save both cities from the depredations of their arch-nemeses, Lex Luthor and the Joker.

Mention must also be made of *World's Funnest*. This one-shot, which came out in 2000, sees other-dimensional imps Bat-Mite and Mr Mxyzptlk go on a rampage of violent mischief and mayhem, during which they manage to eradicate just about everyone on all of DC's multiple Earths. A host of artistic greats supply the visuals for Evan Dorkin's hilariously irreverent, nose-thumbing script. *World's Funnest* takes the Batman/Superman partnership to its logical extreme – and then beyond, way beyond into glorious absurdity.

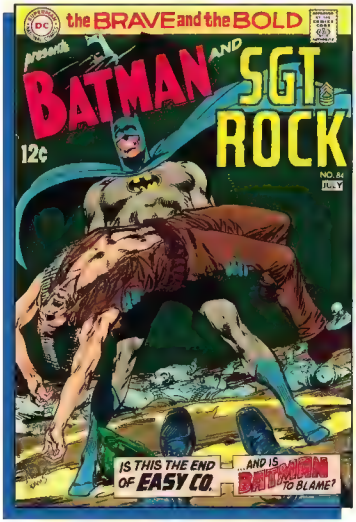
BATMAN GAINED HIS VERY OWN TEAM-UP BOOK IN 1965.

For its first 24 issues, *The Brave And The Bold* had been an anthology title spotlighting historical adventure characters, such as Viking Prince and Silent Knight. With #25 it became a try-out book and then, with #50, a venue for team-ups between established DC superhero characters. Batman took his first lead role in #59, and from #74 until its demise with #200, *The Brave And The Bold* was exclusively a Batman team up title.

The early Batman issues rank among the best Bat-comics ever produced, in large part because Neal Adams is supplying the art; Bob

DC
12c
AUG. NO 177
WORLD'S FINEST
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
SOCK IT TO HIM LUTHOR, BABY! GUN DOWN THAT GRINNING GARGOYLE!
BLAST THAT BALD BANDIT, JOKER! I'M WITH YOU!
WHY DO BATMAN AND SUPERMAN GET INTO... "THE DUEL OF THE DIME-KINGS!" ???

I SEE TWO DISTINGUISHED GUESTS HERE TONIGHT...THE PHILANTHROPIST AND BIG BUSINESSMAN, BRUCE WAYNE...AND METROPOLIS'S OWN FAMED TV NEWSMAN...CLARK KENT!
Spot the difference! (Clark's specs aside.)



Haney, as writer, raises his game to match the superb visuals too. Batman joins forces with top DC names such as the Flash, Aquaman and Wonder Woman, as well as offbeat second-stringers like Deadman, the Creeper and, in a flashback to World War 2, Sgt Rock and Easy Company. Issue #85 is an acknowledged classic, as it introduces Green Arrow's new, tougher looking costume.

From #98, Jim Aparo took over as main penciller, with Nick Cardy filling in here and there, and – while less consistently amazing – *The Brave And The Bold* remained a solid, entertaining read with the occasional outstanding issue. (The one in which the Atom shrinks down to microscopic size and commandeers a comatose Batman's body in order to save a hostage – #115 – is as daft as it sounds but terrific fun nonetheless, and #150 is a strong story with a surprise mystery guest star. Hint: think *World's Finest*.) Batman meeting international air aces the Blackhawks in #167 is memorable too, as is his encounter with Hawk and Dove in #181, while the final issue of the run is enlivened by art from Dave Gibbons, among others, and has an interesting twist in that the two characters billed as teaming up – Batman and his Golden Age Earth Two counterpart – don't actually meet.

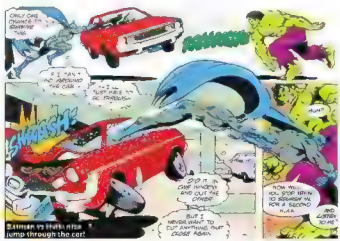
THE MAIN THRILL OF READING THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD month after month, as with any team-up book, was the sheer range of guest stars: you were never quite sure who was going to turn up next. (One month it would be somebody predictable like Hawkman, Green Lantern or Black Canary; the next you'd perhaps have barely heard of them, as with Kamandi, Rose and Thorn, or Richard Dragon, Kung Fu Fighter.) Yet at the same time Batman was a constant, anchoring the title, giving it consistency and stability.

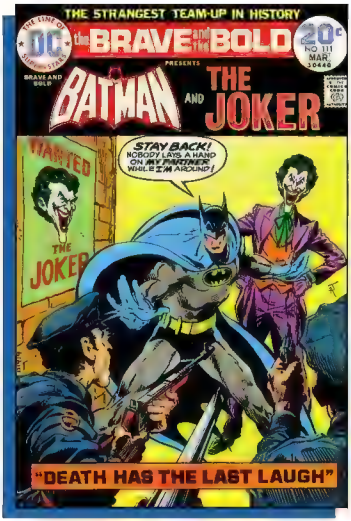
This combination of familiarity and the unexpected allowed the title to remain fresh; it certainly didn't seem to matter how temperamentally compatible Batman was with his temporary ally. In fact, placing the dour, deadpan Batman of the Bronze Age alongside characters as lighthearted and absurd as Plastic Man, Metamorpho or the Metal Men – or even forcing him into a brief, uneasy alliance with one of his madcap antagonists like the Joker or the Riddler – often yielded the best results. Batman would then become the straight man in a comedy double act, the anvil off which sparks could be struck.

> **Batman has been a stalwart of the team-up scene since the '50s**

THINGS OCCASIONALLY GET MORE UNPREDICTABLE YET, however. Batman has strayed outside the DCU a number of times to co-star with other publishers' characters. The first recorded instance of this is the Batman/Hulk one-shot in the early '80s, a largely forgotten book that followed on from the successful *Superman Vs Spider-Man* treasury edition of 1976, and its 1981 sequel *Superman And Spider-Man*.

Though graced with crisp art by the perennially underrated José Luis García-López, *Batman Vs The Incredible Hulk* is an odd, incongruous affair. Batman, more brains than brawn, and the Hulk, more brawn than brains, really don't have much in common, and in spite of the creators' best efforts, nothing gels. (There's a nice scene, though, where the Hulk





throws a car at Batman, and Bruce, rather than get out of the way, leaps to safety by hurling himself head-first through its windows.)

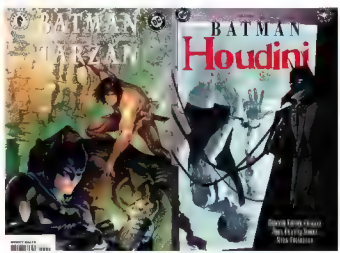
Better Marvel outings were to follow, and Batman seemed to mesh more comfortably with other 'street-level' heroes, such as Spider-Man, Daredevil and the Punisher. *Spider Man And Batman. Disordered Minds*, for instance, makes much of the fact that both heroes have utterly unhinged foes to face (Carnage and the Joker in this instance!), even if the plot fails to give Spidey much to do.

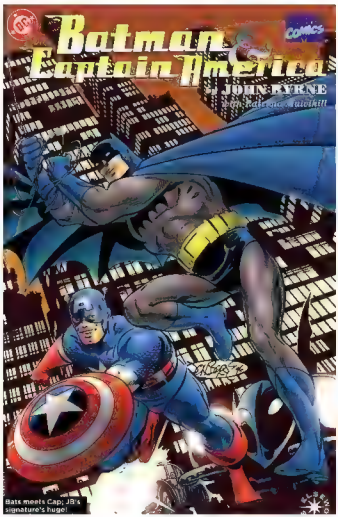
Surpassing them all, however, is the 1996 prestige-format one-shot teaming Batman with Captain America. John Byrne pulls out all the stops as writer/artist here, telling a World War 2 tale with the Joker and Red Skull as the baddies du jour. Throw in a sidekick swap – Robin and Bucky exchanging their adult partners and snarking at each other in the meantime, as only teenagers can – plus an atom bomb and a genuine, honest-to-gosh death trap, and you have a nostalgia-laced treat.

THE BRUCE WAYNE WHO'S ALSO BATMAN
HOW DID YOU KNOW?
I'M NOT SURE I'M READY FOR THIS!
I'M FOR SURE NOT READY FOR THIS!
I'M NOT SURE I'M READY FOR THIS!
I'M FOR SURE NOT READY FOR THIS!
Pink wrapping paper, Clark? Really?

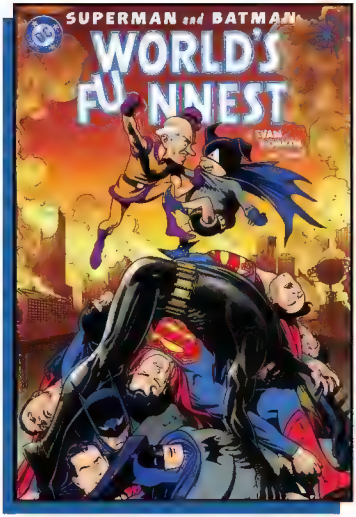
OUTSIDE MARVEL, THERE'S THE MID-'90S DOUBLE THREAT OF *Batman/Spawn* and *Spawn/Batman*, two comics that deserve to pass without mention – except to say that the former is just dull, while the latter sees Frank Miller (script) and Todd McFarlane (art) at their laziest and most cynical. It's basically one long, stupid fight scene.

Far more noteworthy are the brace of encounters between Batman and Matt Wagner's Grendel. These two microseries benefit from having Wagner himself solidly at the helm, and from being set





Batx meets Cap; JB's signature's huge!



firmly within the established Grendel continuity. The first sees the psychopathic Hunter Rose daring the Batman to catch him, in a kind of (if you will) 'bat-and-mouse' game. The original Grendel proves a worthy opponent for the Dark Knight. The second has the Grendel-Prime cyborg travel back in time from the future to kill thousands of Gothamites in a blood sacrifice intended to summon the soul of Hunter Rose. Basically, it's Batman versus the Terminator; not subtle, but a rip-roaring read nonetheless.

BATMAN HAS BUTTED HEADS WITH UBER-COP OF THE future Judge Dredd on no fewer than four occasions too, between 1991 and 1998. It's one of those concepts that shouldn't work, but somehow does: the plots play up the black humour of having two such story-faced arbiters of justice clash. Mega-City One, after all, is just Gotham amped up to the max – and Dredd a version of Batman with the reason and accountability removed.

Batman has tackled Hollywood sci-fi icons too – both Aliens and Predators – but the problem with these crossovers is that they satisfy neither as Batman tales nor as extensions of the movie franchises. In an Alien or Predator film, part of the fun lies in watching a cast of actors get picked off one by one in various gory ways. Batman, however, is hardly likely to wind up incubating a chest burster or impaled fatally on the wrong end of a double-pronged set of wrist-mounted claws. So what's the point?

Elsewhere, *Batman/Tarzan: Claws Of The Cat-Woman* defies expectations by being really rather good, drawing parallels between the pulpy origins of both characters – orphaned scions of great wealth who have adapted to their environments and trained themselves to excel. Conversely, the *Batman/Hellboy/Starman* three-way promises much but fails to deliver, in spite of the usual inkily evocative art job by Mike Mignola.

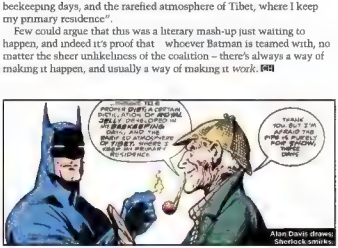
Finally, how about a couple of just-plain bonkers Batman team-ups? The first is *The Devil's Workshop*, in which an early-20th-century Batman unites with none other than Harry Houdini in order to combat a child-abducting albino known as the Joker and his master, who's a vampire.

The script, by Howard Chaykin and John Francis Moore, gets pretty much everything about Houdini wrong – for instance, it has him fluent in Yiddish, when in reality he didn't speak it at all – but at least makes nice use of his escapology skills, and the watercolour art by Mark Chiarello is outstanding.

THEN THERE'S THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE OF DETECTIVE *Comics* (#572), in which the Dark Knight Detective solves a case in tandem with the greatest fictional sleuth of all, Sherlock Holmes. Never mind that Holmes is 135 years old, kept in health, "thanks to a proper diet, a certain distillation of royal jelly, developed in my beekeeping days, and the rarefied atmosphere of Tibet, where I keep my primary residence".

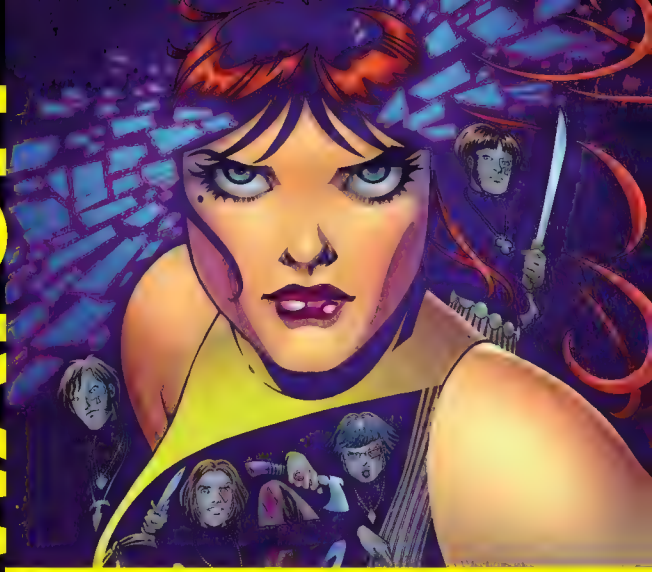
Few could argue that this was a literary mash-up just waiting to happen, and indeed it's proof that – whoever Batman is teamed with, no matter the sheer unlikeliness of the coalition – there's always a way of making it happen, and usually a way of making it *work*.

> **Mega-City One, after all, is just Gotham amped up to the max**



Alan Davis draws Sherlock smirks

FIRST WATCH



Forget Marvel heroes fighting or DC revamping *everything*: this summer's big news might just be *Before Watchmen*, the prequel we never thought we'd see. **By Stephen Jewell**

Given that the UK is the birthplace of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, DC co-publisher Dan DiDio might have been expecting a sterner test than usual when he journeyed to London to bang the drum for *Before Watchmen* at Kapow! last month.

Composed of seven self-contained miniseries and an epilogue one shot, the sprawling prequel to 1986's iconic original *Watchmen* series has been positioned as DC's tent pole publication of the year, but it has also whipped up a storm of controversy of unprecedented proportions in comic book history.

It has divided the opinion of comic professionals like never before, with creators like Chris Roberson and Roger Langridge declaring that they will no longer work for the Time Warner owned firm because of its 'ethically dubious' policies.

NEVERTHELESS, NOTED AUTHORS Brian Azzarello, J Michael Straczynski, Len Wein and Darwyn Cooke have signed up to pen the individual books, which will be illustrated by leading artists such as JG Jones, Adam Hughes, Jae Lee, Amanda Conner, Lee Bermejo and Andy and Joe Kubert, while the likes of Joshua Middleton, Michael Golden, Jim Lee and even the legendary Jim Steranko will provide variant covers.

Certainly the first glimpse of some very closely guarded interior pages was greeted with enthusiasm by fans at DC's All Access panel at Kapow!, with even some of the bitterest critics conceding that it is, at least, visually impressive.

However, DC's senior vice president of sales, Bob Wayne, neatly deflected persistent questions concerning Moore's very vocal opposition to the project, which he has dismissed as 'completely shameless'. Dan DiDio was more willing to discuss the contentious issues surrounding *Before Watchmen* when *Comic Heroes* sat down with him later that day.

"Whether people approach the argument in a good or bad way," he insists, "I always enjoy it. The one thing we try to stay away from at DC is apathy, and people not caring about what we do. And a lot of people care about *Watchmen*."

"I hope everybody keeps an open mind and lets the product speak for itself"

Comic Heroes: Has the reaction to *Before Watchmen* been harsher in the UK than it's been in the US?

Dan DiDio: We know how personal *Watchmen* is to people in the UK, because of the connection with Alan and Dave. So, it was really important

for us to make the UK one of the last stops on our tour, so we could meet everybody and speak to people directly.

I talked to a number of different folk who were sceptical, but hearing how we feel about it has put their minds at ease. We could do all the interviews in the world, but unless we get that one-on-one contact with people, they don't get a sense of how much time and effort we're putting in

CH: Alan Moore has completely condemned *Before Watchmen*, even suggesting that anyone who buys it shouldn't also buy his new material, as he holds them in utter contempt. How do you respond to his stance?

DD: I really *do* understand his position – and I say that wholeheartedly. When Alan and Dave first created *Watchmen*, the industry was changing and they were at the forefront of that.

We did go to them at the start and they passed on it, so we decided to continue with the project in the way we felt most comfortable with, and that we felt was the best way to proceed in order to stay true to the original. I hope everybody keeps an open mind and lets the product speak for itself.

CH: Moore has complained about the contract he and Gibbons signed in the early '80s, which stated that the rights to *Watchmen* would revert back to them once it had been out of print for a year. *Watchmen* has since become one of the most famous graphic novels of all time and, consequently, has never been out of print.

DD: In some ways, the success of *Watchmen* is the cause of the problem – and also the reason why we exist. The fact that it was such a hit means that it's always going to be out there. That's one of the reasons why everybody stayed so firmly behind it.

There were so many other series created at the same time that have since disappeared, and have now been forgotten, but this is an enduring property and we want to make sure that it stays that way. It's DC keeping the book in print, and making it available in so many formats, that has allowed people from different generations to constantly find it.

CH: Dave Gibbons hasn't contributed to *Before Watchmen*, but he has given it his stamp of approval.

DD: Dave, for the most part, has been most supportive of the project. It's »

Above: Each *Before Watchmen* mini-series has been crafted by a different creative team.

his art so they're his children too. He understands the reason behind it, and what we're trying to do. He'd prefer that we didn't do it, but he also doesn't want to stand in our way. He understands how the industry has to progress and how it has to grow.

CH: Was the success of Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* film in 2009 a factor in finally deciding to release a follow-up after all these years?

DD: We knew that there was huge interest in the product from how well it's sold over the years, and because the movie was out there, we'd seen the material adapted into a form that wasn't the original graphic novel. We also have a more aggressive nature now in regards to what we need to do to keep this industry strong and vibrant.

I've used the analogy back in the States that if you're playing a team sport, you never leave your best players on the bench, and these characters are some of the best players in the DC Universe. After 25 years, and just one product, people still cared and wanted to know about these characters, so it made sense to put something out there.

But if we were going to do it, we had to make sure that we had the proper talent behind it. Not just anybody can step up and do these books.

CH: Usually DC release a Universe-spanning blockbuster crossover like *Flashpoint* or *Final Crisis* in the summer, so *Before Watchmen* makes for a very different kind of 'event' book to Marvel's *Avengers Vs X-Men*.

DD: There are two different ways to do events: you can either bring all your characters together to fight a common threat, or you can do something that really feels special and unique. That's what an event used to be for me. It was something that felt quite separate to everything else, especially now, when it seems like every character is in every other character's books all the time. You've got to find new ways to excite the fans, and we felt this was one way to do that.

CH: Was the original's very definitive conclusion the reason why you chose to do prequels?

DD: There was a very finite ending to that story – a lot of the key characters were either dead or gone – so that limits the potential for more stories set afterwards. There was more potential in the events leading up to the start of the story, because all the characters had very full lives and careers that we didn't see. A lot of that was layered in the book with just a simple one line statement here, a panel there or a paragraph over there. We went through the material, built stories and found ways to make it fit in naturally so that it didn't contradict anything in *Watchmen*. We wanted to add new levels to these characters that would

help you understand their behaviour, and how they got to where they were.

CH: Why did you opt for a series of miniseries by different creators?

DD: We could have done one story with one creative team, but the level of scrutiny would have been a little more difficult, as it would have seemed more like an apples-to-apples comparison.

We wanted to find ways to explore all the different characters – there were so many wonderful people that I wanted to use, and this was a way to get more creators involved. We were also able to present different styles and looks, to show that we didn't just want to imitate what went before, but to find people who could put their own stamp on these characters – in a way that stays true to their original interpretation.

CH: How did you come to assemble the different creative teams?

DD: It took a few years. There was a board in my office and the names on it were constantly changing. Originally, we planned to have a different writer for every series, but it became harder to coordinate and they were getting too separate – we wanted them all to fit into the same world, even though they're all standalones. I'd had success with the 52 maxiseries, where we put four writers in a room and together they crafted a weekly series. So we took some of that flavour and found four writers that we felt had very strong voices, weren't afraid of controversy, were prepared to push themselves and had resumes that people couldn't challenge.

> **"If people accept it and want more, we'll revisit it"**

CH: Are the writers emulating Alan Moore's distinctive writing style, or are they adopting their own visions?

DD: The exciting thing is that *Comedian* and *Rorschach* are very clearly Brian Azzarello comics and *Dr Manhattan* and *Nite Owl* are very clearly Joe Straczynki comics. *Ozymandias* is clearly Len, and *Minutemen* and *Silk Spectre* are very much Darwyn's work. All these guys are bringing their own sensibilities to these characters and that's why we've spent so much time and energy finding the right writers and artists.

CH: Artists like Jae Lee, Adam Hughes and JG Jones are some of the best in the business, but they're not exactly known for their speed.

DD: That's why we gave ourselves enough time to be able to build up enough of an inventory. The way that the books roll out, they start out as monthly but then, later on, when you have seven series up and running, they almost shift to bi-monthly, which gives everybody a bit more time to be able to get through their respective series.

Above: Every issue of *Before Watchmen* will have a one in 25 variant cover.

CH: Can we expect more prequels – or even sequels – if *Before Watchmen* proves popular?

DD: It was such an effort to get to where we are now that I can't look that far in advance, but if people accept it and want more then we'll revisit it and we'll do the same again as we did here. We won't go ahead with a project just because people seem to want it, as we need the proper people in place to execute it – they have to have natural stories that they want to tell.

Darwyn Cooke is a good example – I first approached him a couple of years ago, but he basically said that he didn't want to do it because he didn't have a story. It wasn't until a year later that he thought it through and said, 'Wait a minute – I *do* have a story to tell'. As soon as that story became clear in his head, that's when he stepped onboard. Everybody who is working on these books has a story to tell, which is why they're here.

*The first three issues of **Before Watchmen** are out now*

Christopher Watts, aka The Bastard.

Johnny Bolt,
The Gladiator
So how many Triads do you think there are in this room?
Careful, Bolt. You'll hurt the kids!
Relax. I know what I'm doing!

Bolt and his crew make a break for it.

SCARY MONSTERS (AND SUPER CREEPS)

The Mark-Millar-comics-that-would-make-perfect-movies parade continues... Nacho Vigalondo, director of the brilliant *Timecrimes*, is due to bring *Supercrooks* to the big screen. By Stephen Jewell

After the successful big screen adaptations of *Wanted* and *Kick-Ass*, Mark Millar is taking his burgeoning relationship with cinema one step further, developing original properties with established filmmakers that first appear as comic books before eventually making the transition to movies.

Co-created with *Kick Ass* helmer Matthew Vaughan and *Watchmen* artist Dave Gibbons, the credentials of his *The Secret Service* collaborators are hard to beat, but *Supercrooks* – which sees the Scot teaming up with *Supreme* penciller Leinil Yu and rising Spanish director Nacho Vigalondo – could turn out to be his breakout hit of the year.

In London for the Mark Millar fronted Kapow! Comic Con, Vigalondo revealed that it was a chance meeting that united him with his new partner-in-crime.

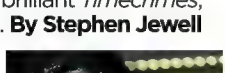
"I won a charity bid and the prize was to have lunch with Mark in LA – at the same time I was there on a business trip," he recalls with a laugh. "I know it sounds insane but my hotel was only three blocks from the Comic-Con he was attending. It was like a total coincidence – I felt that the stars were aligned!"

BORN IN SPAIN'S CANTABRIAN REGION, the 35-year-old has been a comic fan since he was a child. "There was a time when I actually felt closer to comics than I did to movies," he admits. "I fell in love with Mark's work after I read *The Authority* – his first comic book to be published in Spain. I like superheroes but, as a reader, I follow writers and artists rather than characters."

From his 2007 feature debut *Timecrimes* to his inventive SF/love story second effort, *Extraterrestrial*, Vigalondo's films already boast a distinctive comic book influence.

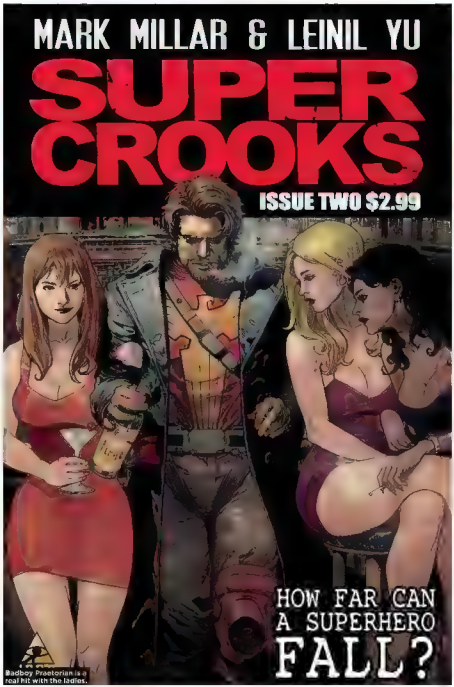
"My mind was blown away by people like Garth Ennis," he says, revealing that both his movies owe a debt to comics.

"*Timecrimes* is a nod to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' old *2000 AD Future Shock* 'Chronocops' – the original Spanish title is *Cronocrimenes* – and *Extraterrestrial* is not very far off a Peter Bagge and Daniel Clowes comics that I read in the '90s."



Nacho Vigalondo in *Timecrimes*.

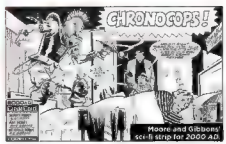
Resembling a version of *Hustle* starring the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, or *Mad Dogs* with the Crime Syndicate, *Supercrooks* centres on a band of washed-up supervillains, led by Johnny Bolt, who reluctantly come out of retirement after their elderly mentor falls foul of the mob. Journeying to Spain's caped



Badboy Praetorian is a real hit with the ladies.

Vigalondo and *Timecrimes*' time-looping Nacho.

The director is a big Hitchcock fan.



Moore and Gibbons' sci-fi strip for *2000 AD*.

❝ There was a time when I actually felt closer to comics than I did to movies ❞

crusader-free shores to pull the proverbial 'last big job', Vigalondo believes that the book's fictional scenario reflects the lack of original superhero titles in his homeland.

"There's a big superhero fandom here and I'd dare to say that, proportionally, we've got as many fans as in the US," he claims. "But, for a Spaniard, the natural environment of super-battles is North America. The only Spanish superheroes we've got are parodies."

With *Supercrooks*' 'heroes' clearly as thick as thieves, Vigalondo believes Bolt and his long-time cohorts share a bond that is closer to the nonchalant camaraderie of Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* than, say, the treacherous backstabbing of Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*.

"If you think about it, *Reservoir Dogs* is a tragedy based in character confrontation," says Vigalondo. "It's the opposite of *Ocean's Eleven*, which is a classic heist. In *Dogs*, the characters shoot each other but in *Ocean's* they'd stop a bullet for each other. *Supercrooks* is totally the latter group."

CREDITED ON THE COMIC BOOK AS co-plotter, Vigalondo contributed to the structure of the story – but will make a much bigger contribution to the movie, which he hopes to shoot after his next film, *Windows*.

"The screenplay is already written," he reveals. "The plot is bigger, with more elements to it. It also feels different – some of the characters' motivations change, some twists have a different nature... We always thought it would be boring and dishonest to just repeat things."

Featuring people discussing whether superheroes should be banned in Spain, Vigalondo insists that the recent satirical promo video for *Supercrooks* isn't an indication of the movie's tone.

"The viral imagines how a documentary would feel in that universe in the same way the adverts in *Robocop* work," he says. "But the movie will be more classic, as I don't think of superhero films as a genre with a specific constant tone. They're action films, adventure films, thrillers or even comedies."

While he won't comment on a *Supercrooks* sequel, Vigalondo intends to collaborate with Millar again in the future. "I'd love to work on more comic-based films," he says. "In fact, Mark and I started discussing further ideas the minute we finished *Supercrooks*." **[CT]**

Supercrooks is due to be released in 2014.

JOHN BYRNE

Talented, influential and a world-class enemy-maker and goat-getter. **James Lovegrove** investigates...

These days, it's hard to separate John Byrne's work from the controversy magnet that he's become, a man almost as famous for his trenchant, opinionated, oft-highly-controversial blog postings, forum comments and interview stances as he is for his comics.

Some might argue that Byrne has produced little of note since the mid '80s, and that his cranky online presence and increasing willingness to take vicious sideswipes at fellow comic professionals – are evidence of a talent in steep decline. He no longer has anything worthwhile to say as a creator, this rationale goes, so instead slags off those who are still popular and successful in his field. He insults the great and the good – Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison and Peter David are among those who have been on the receiving end of a Byrne tongue-lashing - not as an equal, but out of pure spite and envy.

Two facts remain, however. The first is that Byrne continues to thrive, long after many of his peers and contemporaries have fallen by the wayside, put this down to the simple fact that he remains one of the most proficient and dependable writer/artists around. The second is that he's bloody good: never less than highly competent, and at his peak simply one of the slickest, most appealing artists in comics.

Byrne's scripts almost universally display a strong grasp of character and plotting, allied to a genuine love of the medium that shines through, while his illustrative style is beautifully rounded and composed – not 'realistic' in the Neal Adams style, yet his figures always look like real people, even when they're lumpy piles of rock like The Thing or seven-foot-tall Amazons like She-Hulk. His depiction of convoluted Jack-Kirby-esque machinery is a treat too.

And beyond all this, Byrne reliably delivers. At his peak, his output rivalled that of George Perez – and even Jack Kirby. (Online he reserves his greatest scorn for creators who repeatedly miss deadlines, lambasting them for being 'lazy, arrogant, unprofessional cocksuckers' – and which of us would not echo at least part of that sentiment as we learn that the latest issue of a favourite title has yet again failed to ship?) Byrne appears to retain huge respect for his readers, if not always for the industry, and does his utmost to ensure that they never feel shortchanged.

Born in West Bromwich in 1950, John Byrne grew up on a diet of British comics – *Eagle* and such – until his family emigrated to Canada when he was eight. There, he discovered the Lee/Kirby *Fantastic Four*, and Kirby's art, as well as that of Neal Adams, would prove a major influence.

His earliest commissions were for Charlton Comics in the mid-'70s, co-creating the robot character Rog-2000 and the post-apocalyptic SF strip *Doomsday +1*, among others. Since then, he has worked on virtually every major superhero for DC and Marvel, contributing acclaimed runs to *X Men*, *Fantastic Four* and *Superman*, as well as turning his attention to licensed properties such as *Star Trek* and *Angel* for IDW. But he's immensely inventive too, having produced plenty of creator-owned material – much of it of the highest quality.

Here are just a handful of highlights from a staggeringly prolific four-decade career… »

THE EXTRAORDINARILY SUCCESSFUL ONE
UNCANNY X-MEN

Byrne had pencilled a variety of second-tier titles for Marvel (*Iron Fist*, *The Champions*, *Marvel Team Up*) when, in 1977, he took over art chores on *Uncanny X-Men*, starting with #108. In tandem with ongoing scribe Chris Claremont, he quickly made the book a critical and commercial mega-hit

It was Byrne who insisted that Wolverine from Canada, like himself – be integral to the team, and the result is a character who remains iconic to this day, a mainstay of the Marvel universe. Byrne had increasing input into the book's plotting too, so that much of the credit for intricate meta-arcs, such as the slow-burning 'Hellfire Club' epic and the 'Dark Phoenix Saga', must lie with him.

In Terry Austin, Byrne found an inker who not only interpreted his pencils sympathetically but lent them added lustre and dynamism. Any of the 30-odd issues of *Uncanny X-Men* generated by the Claremont/Byrne/Austin troika is essential reading.

THE ONE THAT PUT THE 'GREAT' BACK INTO 'THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE'
FANTASTIC FOUR

Byrne's tenure on *Fantastic Four* ranks almost as high in most people's estimation as the Lee/Kirby glory years. Having provided pencils for scripts by others, Byrne took over as writer, penciller and inker with #232. From then until #260 he turned in superlative work, restoring a sense of the FF as cosmic explorers while reinforcing their identity as, first and foremost, a family.

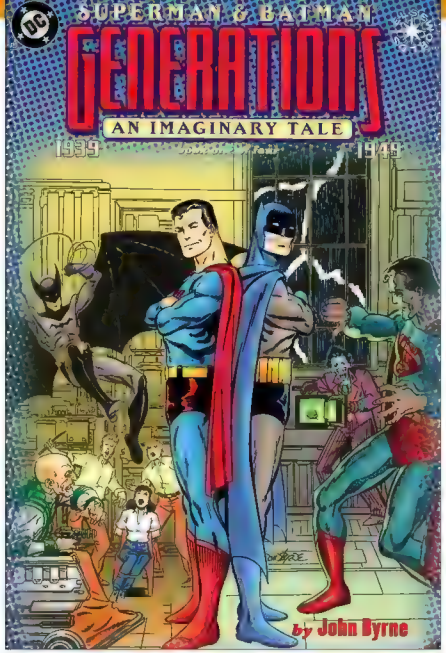
He made changes too, of course, but never arbitrarily or to the comic's detriment. He altered the costumes ever so slightly, replaced The Thing with She-Hulk for a while, and promoted Sue Richards from Invisible Girl to Invisible Woman, ramping up her powers at the same time – never again would she be the constantly fretting and fainting weak link in the chain.

Amongst this run are memorable *Twilight Zone*-style one-off episodes such as 'The Man With The Power' (#234) and 'Terror In A Tiny Town' (#236). There's the experimental 'sideways' issue, #252, which reads landscape rather than portrait. And throughout there is consistent good use of the FF's major foes

THE ONE THAT'S TALKING TO YOU (YES, YOU!): SHE-HULK

Byrne's inordinate fondness for She-Hulk resulted in her being given a second shot at her own title. In Byrne's hands, She-Hulk – now 'Sensational' rather than 'Savage' – became one of those characters who is aware that everything that happens to her is taking place in the pages of a comic book. This breaking of the fourth wall allows her to comment ironically on the absurdity of the barrel scraping villains she goes up against (Terrible Toad Men, Stilt-Man, Dr Bong!, and for Byrne to play around with comic conventions – our heroine might take a shortcut between scenes by stepping across panel borders, for instance, or address the reader directly

As established in Byrne's She-Hulk graphic novel, Jennifer Walters is that rare thing, a Marvel superhero who enjoys having powers. Not for her the constant angst and self-loathing moaning that Marvelites had become accustomed to from Spider-Man onwards, refreshingly, here is someone who thinks being a superhero is actually kind of a blast, and her attitude makes the book doubly fun.



THE ONE THAT SPANS DECADES: BATMAN: GENERATIONS

Superman & Batman: Generations seems to have been inspired by a strip that briefly featured in *World's Finest Comics*. The 'Super-Sons' were Superman Jr and Batman Jr, youthful versions of their fathers, apples who did not fall far from the tree – but were perhaps a little hipper and angrier than their dads, in true early-'70s-teen fashion.

In a brace of four-issue miniseries, plus a 12-issue maxiseries, published between 1999 and 2004, Byrne extrapolated the concept. His Elseworlds tales visit the Super and Bat dynasties at regular intervals, beginning in the pre World War 2 era and ending in the far flung future. Plenty of other DC characters are drawn into this time-leaping saga of birthright and heredity, which proves to be carefully plotted heaven for nostalgists – and hell for continuity sticklers.

THE ONE WORTH KEEPING A BROTHER EYE OUT FOR: OMAC

In 1991 Byrne took it upon himself to revive one of Kirby's odder '70s DC creations, OMAC. His take on everyman Buddy Blank, who can be transformed into a superhuman 'One Man Army Corps' by a power ray beamed down from a satellite, is faithful to the original – but also violent and time-twisty. The miniseries explores what it means to be a soldier trapped in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of war and conflict, and gives satisfying roundness and completion to a comic that was cancelled before Kirby himself could bring it to a conclusion.

Byrne's decision to draw in black and white, using Duo-Tone shading to lend shape and texture, was a bold one – and works wonderfully well. This *OMAC* is a bargain-bin gem that is long overdue reprinting in a collected edition.

THE ONE THAT SEEMED FINISHED, BUT ISN'T: NEXT MEN

Few comic creators exert as much control over their product as Byrne, so when the market for creator-owned comics really began to open up in the early '90s, who better than he to join the parade? *Next Men* was truly Byrne's baby, the culmination of all he'd learned and felt about the superhero genre after nearly two decades working within it. His group of five superpowered characters don't band together with the noble goal of fighting crime; instead, they're defined by their interrelationships and the effect their existence has on the world around them.

Practical matters intrude, too. In *Next Men*, Byrne seems eager to pursue issues usually unacceptable with corporately-owned characters: stuff like how a man with enhanced strength might have sex with a less resilient woman, and what sort of extraordinarily over-developed leg musculature a real-world super-speedster would possess.

Byrne has recently returned to the series and if you can overlook the excessive, almost sadistic cruelties he often inflicts on his characters, it's definitely worth your time.

SKY-RIDER OF THE SPACEWAYS

It's The Silver Surfer's first ongoing series: bold, different, sporadically glorious – and ultimately a massive failure, failing to find an audience and ripping the heart out of Marvel at the same time. **By Matt Bielby**

It was Stan Lee's dream project, the one he put so much love into; the one that briefly soared. It was John Buscema's tour de force, the most spectacular monthly book from Marvel's greatest draftsman. And it was Jack Kirby's final insult, the betrayal that knocked the stuffing out of him.

After *The Silver Surfer* #1 of 1968 – an incredible thing, with knocking-on 40 pages of story, plus a *Watcher* back-up strip, for [expensive at the time] 25 cents – the extent of Lee's ambition became clear. This was superhero adventure as art – a love missile aimed right at Marvel's growing college fanbase. But there was a huge problem here. *Surfer* #1 had debuted with no material by the primary creator of the *Fantastic Four*'s breakout enemy cum guest star, Jack Kirby, and, in an understandable strop, Marvel's greatest artist washed his hands of the character.

To Kirby's mind, one of his favourite sons had been stolen from him; indeed, he'd been working on an origin story for the enigmatic sky-rider himself. This tale – to have appeared in the *FF*, which Kirby still largely controlled – would have revealed The Surfer as a creature of pure energy, a truly alien being who'd have to slowly learn what being human was all about. Now, Kirby learned, Lee and Buscema were offering up a contradictory origin; their version was a regular guy from another world who'd sacrificed himself for his sterile and complacent people, transformed into Galactus' death-herald in exchange for sparing their planet.

Kirby immediately abandoned his version and pretty much quit creating anything new for Marvel. The invention machine that had powered the *FF* and *Thor*, driving the DC-battering tidal wave of character generation that had made Marvel the hottest thing in comics, fell silent. Could Kirby survive at the company without making stuff and could Marvel survive without Kirby's drive? The answer was yes and no. Two years later Jack was at DC, with a brief to create a raft of new heroes – and though Marvel thrived, it would never be quite the same again.

"SKY-BORN SPANNER OF A TRILLION GALAXIES"

Meanwhile, what of the Buscema *Silver Surfer*, the book that had driven such a cosmic wedge? Well, it was pretty amazing – easily the best of a raft of new titles Marvel brought out that year, most created when Lee split ancient two-for-one books like *Tales To Astonish* and *Strange Tales* into separate ongoing monthlies for Hulk, Captain America and others. *Silver Surfer* was a way more ambitious beast, though, with fewer fight scenes than traditional Marvel fare and way more woe-is-me angst. For the first time in ages, Lee seemed to be taking firm control of the plots and the initial results were rather special; Lee's at his most cod-Shakespearean here, his hero abandoning love and freedom for the greater good, then – trapped and abandoned – trying to work out what he's for. "Not even the eagle is without a nest," he says. "Nor shall the Silver Surfer forever remain without a home!"

Buscema, meanwhile, was in his pomp, one of the very few artists who could have kept up, turning in page after page of his most dynamic poses and agonised faces. There are panels and sequences here as dramatic and punchy as anything in comics, and some simply

AT THAT VERY MOMENT, IN ANOTHER WORLD--FURTHER FROM ASGARD THAN THE MIND CAN IMAGINE--YET EVER AS CLOSE AS LOKI'S TREMORAL SPELL--
AMONGST THE MIGHTIEST--THE MOST SUPPOSEDLY SAVAGE BEASTS OF EARTH'S CREATURES--LIVE IN PERFECT PEACE--DWELL IN SAFETY!
FOR FOOD HAS BEEN PLENTIFUL--AND THEY NEED DO THEY HUNGER!
SKY-RIDER OF THE SPACEWAYS!
THE SILVER SURFER
SKY-RIDER OF THE SPACEWAYS!
THE SILVER SURFER
SKY-RIDER OF THE SPACEWAYS!
THE SILVER SURFER
O BITTER VICTORY!
SKY-RIDER OF THE SPACEWAYS!
THE SILVER SURFER
TO STEAL THE SURFER'S SOUL!
SKY-RIDER OF THE SPACEWAYS!
THE SILVER SURFER
SPIDER MAN!

incredible splash pages – Norrin Radd transformed by Galactus; the Surfer like the statue of a mopey Greek hero as he snoozes on his board; Mephisto plotting on his stone throne. Other Marvel heroes are presented with a veracity we'd rarely seen too: you could taste the space-venison at these Asgardian feasts, feel the desperation of a half shaved Fantastic Four as they chase the Surfer down.

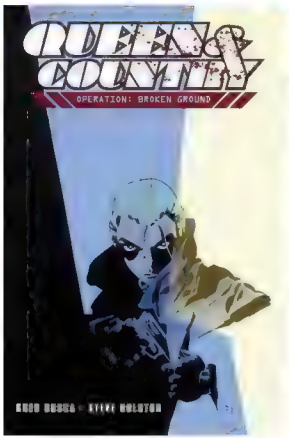
But then, the beginning of the end. With #8 the comic was cut down to normal length, at a normal price, and though it remained well-crafted the spark had gone. This Christ figure was scrapping more, the art more rushed – and once they'd done gods and devils, suitable new enemies seemed thin on the ground. And now Lee was contending with new owners for the company too, his attention tugged in fresh directions. In desperation, plotting and art were handed back to a soon-to-leave-Marvel Kirby, who managed one reboot issue before cancellation; an angry thing co-starring the Inhumans, it's basically one huge fight scene that ends with a raging Surfer abandoning Lee's pacifist ideals for all out war on planet Earth. "From this time forth," our hero shouts, "The Surfer will be the deadliest one of all!" But the follow-up, promising a 'savagely sensational' new Surfer, never appeared.

"THE MOST DRAMATIC SUPERHERO OF ALL"

This is no ordinary series and has to be considered a desperate misfire, despite its considerable strengths, for not only did it drive apart the two most important architects of Marvel Comics, it helped fatally damage both as creative forces. Kirby, of course, still had things in him, but with the best will in the world even *The New Gods* is no *Fantastic Four*. And Lee, perhaps, was even more broken; it's hard to think of another comic he wrote with real passion after the Surfer had gone, while his refusal to allow any other creator to revive the character, beyond sporadic one-shots and guest appearances, would last the best part of 20 years. The Silver Surfer never actually died in the comics, but he stayed silent for longer than many who actually do. **HT**

Above: Buscema's *Silver Surfer* might have dazzled – sadly but sadly it soon lost its sparkle

The Essential Silver Surfer Vol #1 *contains this entire run, looking lovely in black and white; colour versions are available too,* ***The Silver Surfer Omnibus Vol #1*** *being way the most luxurious*



QUEEN'S MAN

After a decade at DC, Greg Rucka's guiding Marvel's *The Punisher*, venturing into webcomics, and – just maybe – returning to the espionage series we might love him for best... **By Joel Meadows**

Above: *Queen & Country*'s main protagonist is SIS secret operative Tara Chace

Writer Greg Rucka is in an unusual position in the world of comics. Since the mid-'90s he has written everything, from his own creations – like *Queen & Country* and *Whiteout*, spy stories full of twists, and usually depicted in moody black and-white to more mainstream superhero fare, including handling such icons as Wolverine and Wonder Woman. But he also has a sizeable following as a prose author, notably with his Atticus Kodiak thrillers.

Rucka is currently writing for Marvel, having spent most of the last decade or so at the heart of chief rival DC, where he contributed to everything from mammoth weekly crossover epic *52*, to two of the company's long-established cornerstone titles, *Action Comics* and *Detective Comics*.

One treat he enjoyed at DC was the chance to reinvent Steve Ditko's oddball The Question – a two-fisted, Ayn Randian investigative journalist-cum-crimefighter in a faceless mask – for a modern readership; this new version swapped sex, and race, and sexual orientation, but still struggled with her mission...

"A lot of what we were doing with *52*," Rucka says, "and the reason I think it succeeded, was that it was thematically driven, not plot driven. And one of the questions we were asking was: what does it take to be a hero in the DC Universe? The arc we had for Renee Montoya, over the course of the year, was that she would grow to become The Question. We always knew that was going to be the case. I love the [original] Question; you don't do that kind of thing because you hate the character, but because you want to honour it. Any time you take something away, you want to replace

GREG RUCKA WRITER
It's really dreadful, the way all the creatures argue.
It's enough to drive one crazy.
ALICE
YOU'VE HURT MY FATHER.
You should learn not to make personal remarks...
...it's rude--
KATE--
ARTIST JH WILLIAMS III

Batwoman images: © DC Comics. The Punisher images: © Marvel

it; you don't want to diminish it. You want to complete a journey, then begin it anew – or provide a new context."

It seemed like a deliberate attempt to diversify the DC Universe at the time: Renee had always been a Gotham City cop, and Hispanic; now she'd become a lesbian, an alcoholic, a troubled avenger.

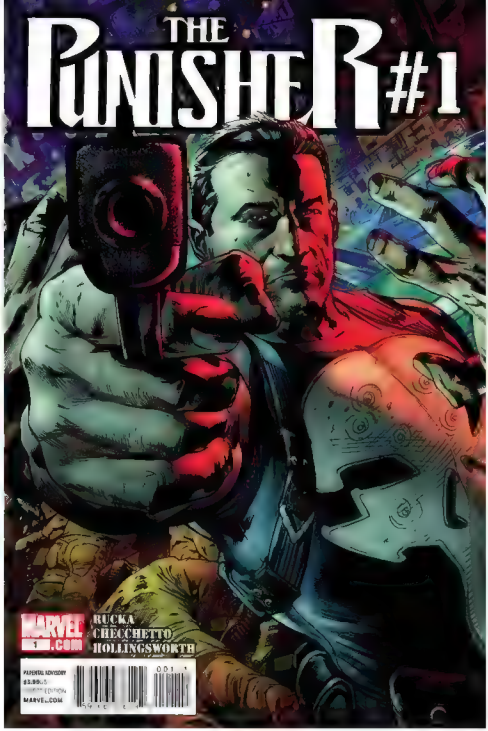
"It's one of the other things we were trying to do. Crispus Allen had become The Spectre too – we'd taken one of the strongest 'normal' African-Americans we had in the DCU and made him an angel of god's vengeance. It was something that was done with deliberation and a great deal of care."

> **"I didn't write a word, and I don't think he drew a panel, that we hadn't discussed for hours"**

While working at DC, Rucka also got the chance to work on *Batwoman* with the distinctive artist JH Williams. This second incarnation of the character – the new Batwoman, Kate Kane, was both Jewish and another lesbian – briefly in 2009 became the star of the long-running Batman title, *Detective Comics*.

Above: In 2009 Rucka collaborated with JH Williams on *Batwoman*.

"If that isn't the best collaboration I've ever had in the mainstream," Rucka says, "it's certainly one of the top two. JH is an artist of the highest order. I've never had a collaboration in comics as intimate as that. I didn't write a word, and I don't think he drew a panel, that we hadn't discussed for hours. We would literally have up to »



eight or ten hours of phone conversations before I'd sit down to write. He'd get a script that would say, 'Jim, here's that lightning bolt thing we talked about.' All of it was - with the exception of the very first issue – him, me and editor Mike Siglain discussing it at length, and knowing what we were doing at every turn."

RUCKA IS NO LONGER AT DC – things ended a little unhappily there, you could say – but has left behind him a number of important runs and crucial character developments, not least a long stint on *Action Comics*, where he played a major role reintroducing Kryptonian characters Nightwing and Flamebird. As so often happens with creators, who love switching between 'the Big Two', he's since hopped across town to Marvel, where he's currently writing *The Punisher*. Not that this was a foregone conclusion: the opportunity only cropped up thanks to the persistence of that title's editor, as he admits with a slight smirk.

"It came about because Steve Wacker won't take no for an answer," Rucka explains. "He called me up and said, 'I have a crazy idea; I think you should write *Punisher*.' And I said, 'Ha ha ha.' That was the end of that call, but he kept coming back to me, saying 'I really think you'd be a good fit, and this is why.' I've talked about this elsewhere, but he has a gift that very good editors have: the ability to ask the right question of the writer. He knows what to ask me to get me thinking, and that's what he did."

The Punisher seems an obvious fit, with Rucka's crime story background – but perhaps not the current incarnation, chucked right back into the middle of the normal Marvel '616' Universe after so long in more grim, realistic 'Marvel MAX' tales.

"The first thing he said to me was, 'We want to do Punisher in the 616 Universe'. So I said, 'You're crazy. He's gonna kill people; who's he gonna kill?' The immediate question you have to ask is: if you've got Punisher running around in the mainstream Marvel Universe, why is he allowed to persist? It's a universe full of heroes that feel very strongly about murder. He can dress it up however he likes but, in the end, he's committing a lot of murders.

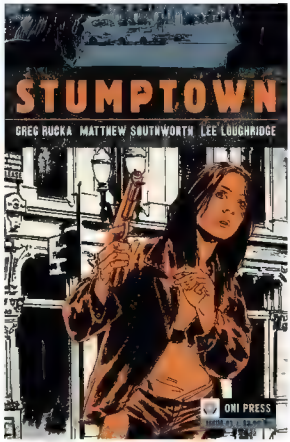
"So we started talking about it, and that's what led to the first story arc. This is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end; at this point, we're coming to the end of the second act."

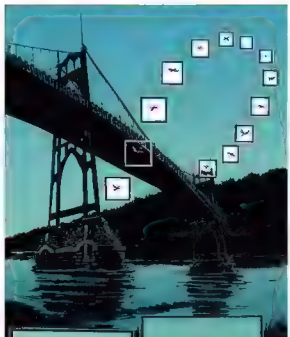
Punisher in the MAX tales could operate in a very ambiguous place; put him up against Spider-Man or Daredevil, as he was in his earliest tales, and most of that melts away. Surely in that context this guy is either evil or insane; whichever, he's very much the cut-and-dried villain...

"One of the problems I had," Rucka explains, "was with the politics that surround him. But the more I started thinking about the character, and the more Steve and I talked, the more it

Above: Rucka is currently busy penning Marvel's kick-ass vigilante *The Punisher*

Greg Rucka Surgical & Health Center
BUT IT STARTED ME SO YOU PUT ON THAT SILLY MASK AND NOW YOU AND MOTHER FART-WEEDS GOT GRIEF
MMM-HMM! FLIRTING WITH ME
OH, NO DEAL, NO TWAGS!
DEAL AND I DEFINDS ME YOU HARDNED?
THEN I'M FLIRTING WITH YOU, DOCTOR
AND HERE I AM, TRYING TO BE PROFESSIONAL
I'M NOTTING HERE IN MY SECOND-BEST SEA
BUT IN HINSTY
WAH-WAHING YOUR DETRIMENT





"If there isn't an emotional tether, there's no reason to read on. You won't engage unless you feel something"

became clear that – while you could certainly portray him in this very right-wing, arch-conservative, gun-nut way – I honestly think that's unfair to the character."

How so?

"I think the politics are irrelevant. Everything that he's doing is so personal. He's not crazy. If he *is* crazy, then there's no point in exploring the character. But everything he does is with deliberation. He's made a series of decisions and is now pursuing those choices, and – as a result of these choices – you have the character you have now. So, one of the first things I had to do was disconnect that political discourse because, frankly, I think it's unfair to The Punisher; it overly simplifies him."

As with so many popular comic book characters – Wolverine or Spider-Man at Marvel, say – so many strong tales have been told about The Punisher at this point that, you must sometimes wonder, 'What else is there to say about this guy?'

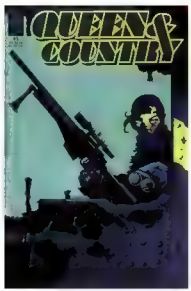
"Certainly, Garth Ennis had explored him so well and so fully," Rucka says, "and then you had Jason Aaron and Matt Fraction and, later, Rick Remender – with all of them doing these wonderful runs. For me, the big entry point was saying, 'Well, Frank doesn't have anything to say anymore.' There's no point getting into his head, because it's been explored so beautifully by other people before me. I'm not going to be able to offer anything new.

"But what I *can* offer is an approach that allows you to look at him from the outside. I personally find characters to be more interesting that way. I think Batman's more interesting from the outside, as is Superman."

Above: *Stumptown* is set in the same world as Rucka's Atticus Kodiak novels

So we're watching him go about his business; fine. But how much should you engage with him?

"You have to believe in Kate Kane for *Batwoman* to work, you have to believe in Rachel Cole [a female



vigilante who's become an important figure in recent *Punisher* stories] right now for her story to work, and you have to believe in a Frank Castle who really did everything right – only to come back and have it all stolen from him. If you don't honour those things, you end up depleting the motive, and I think you destroy a connection with the reader.

"If there isn't an emotional tether, there's no reason to read on. I'm not going to engage you unless you feel something. And you want a legitimacy to Frank's point of view, as you want a legitimacy to Cole's pain: 'Here I was on the happiest day of my life, and everybody I love is now dead.' That might mess you up a bit, and it might lead you to a place where the only way you can express that grief is through violent rage. People have to pay."

AS WELL AS HIS MAINSTREAM comic work, Rucka has made a name for himself as creator of the celebrated espionage series *Queen & Country* for Oni; these tales of British spies were inspired, in part, by the classic late-'70s

Above: Rucka teamed up with Steve Lieber on the Antarctic-based *Whiteout* for Oni

ITV show *The Sandbaggers*. There haven't been new issues of the comic since 2007, but – happily for fans – Rucka will be returning to *Q&C* soon.

"There's more coming," he smiles. "The most recent novel, *The Last Run*, left things in a certain place for more, and if I go back to *Q&C* comics I want to deliver them in a timely fashion. At the end of the first *Q&C* run the issues were months apart, it was absurd, and it was largely because I was doing so much work for DC. But I'm not working for DC anymore, and I'm only doing a moderate amount for Marvel."

And there's certainly enough real-world inspiration for a never-ending series of spy tales.

"It's always a good time; it's just a question of where you're looking. We have a perpetual 'War on Terror' that's going to persist for another decade, if not longer. So there's always grist for the mill. But we forget that espionage is more than just hunting and killing the terrorist. It's allied governments fucking each other over, it's business, it's technology, it's all of it."

And on top of *Punisher* and *Queen & Country*, there's also a webcomic.

"*Lady Sabre* happened because Rick Burchett" – an artist best known for comic book versions of the successful Batman animated TV shows – "and I realised that nobody would pay us to do what we wanted, so we had to come up with something on our own.

"It's a pulp serial adventure story, and we do two updates a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Rick and I have so many similar interests; the

steampunk genre just fitted it beautifully. We try and do it in terms of screens: some days you get two screens, some days you get one, and some days you get three – and then it breaks into chapters. It's at www.ineffablearther.com or lady-sabre.com. Either will get you to the website, it's free, and it's been a lot of fun."

There are a number of writers who shift happily between comic work and prose – Mike Carey is another; Neil Gaiman, of course – but Rucka seems to particularly relish the variety.

"They're two different things, and they require two different skillsets. In the broadest sense, there's story and plot and character. Those things come together very nicely. But when I'm writing a script, I'm writing a letter to the artist or whoever. I'm saying to them, 'This is the story we're telling, and these are the important things'. When you're writing in prose, or writing a novel, it's a direct conduit to the readers. Everything you put down is for the reader. I used to be able to shift gears effortlessly, but it takes more deliberation now."

> **"DC's market is males aged 18-34: lots of tits, lots of ass and lots of heads being blown off"**

EVEN THOUGH HE ISN'T PLAYING a part in the current DC New 52 line, we were curious about what he thought of his former employer's current plans. As we wrapped up our chat, his response was honest.

"I think DC rebranded the line to appeal to a readership that I'm not a part of any more. That's all I can really say. They're making choices that are very deliberate, trying to reach an audience that I don't belong to – and it seems to be working for them, so congratulations. But I've been told point blank that the agenda, and the market, is males aged 18-34. So now we know how that gets interpreted: you're going to have lots of tits and lots of ass and lots of heads being blown off. I'm not interested in that. I'm going to do *Lady Sabre* – and, when I want to blow off a head occasionally, I've got *Punisher* for that."

So it's not your DC any more?

"It's a business, and getting upset over something like that is absurd."

Above: Rucka's the comic book go-to guy for tough heroes and ballsy women

***The Punisher** is available in all good comic shops; keep your eyes peeled for more **Queen & Country**, or buy the collected editions; read **Lady Sabre** at lady sabre.com*

ALTERED IMAGE

Saga, _Fatale_, _America's Got Powers_: Image Comics, one-time home to the most in-your-face superheroes in comics, has been quietly transformed into our most progressive publisher. Creative boss Eric Stephenson explains. By Stephen Jewell

Lost amongst all the shouting – the Avengers fighting X-Men! Will *Before Watchmen* be any good (and should they be doing it anyway?) – it's easy to forget that, quietly working away in the background, leading 'independent' publisher Image Comics has been having a simply astounding year.

Not since its noisy 1992 launch, when a half dozen or so of Marvel's headline artists all upped sticks at once, relocating to California and stunning the industry with a parade of flashy, lightly-plotted superhero strips, has the company been home to quite so many big-name writers and artists. Better, the current crop of Image books are ambitious, imaginative and cover a wide range of genres: suddenly, a vast number of fans are finding an Image title or two amongst their very favourite comics.

In the past six months alone, Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips have released beguiling horror noir *Fatale*; Brian K Vaughan has made his long overdue return to comics with the Fiona Staples-illustrated *Saga*; and Jonathan Ross and Bryan Hitch have teamed up on a new superhero extravaganza, *America's Got Powers*.

And, as if that wasn't enough, before 2012 is out Grant Morrison will have made his Image debut proper with the Darick Robertson-drawn *Happy*, and Mark Millar and Frank Quitely will collaborate (for the first time since *The Authority*, 10 years ago) on *Jupiter's Children*. And that's not to mention the continuing success of Robert Kirkman and Charlie Adlard's *The Walking Dead*, which celebrates its 100th issue in July, just before the third season of AMC's hit spin-off TV show debuts in the autumn.

Eric Stephenson – who was once editorial assistant for two of the company's founders, Jim Valentino and Rob Liefeld – has spent more than two decades at the Berkeley-based outfit, gradually clawing his way up the ranks.

Image has jostled, in recent years, with Dark Horse and IDW for the position of 'third largest' US comic publisher after Marvel and DC, but – right here, right now – the heat seems to be all coming from Image…

CH: Why has this been such a brilliant year for Image, with so many sellout hits?

ES: It's been the biggest since we started, almost, and the timing couldn't have worked out better. It's our 20th anniversary, and – though this could have happened at any point earlier – I like the symmetry of that.

CH: For many years Image comics – in the public's mind, at least – were all of a type: superhero team books, dramatic and a little shallow. But not any more…

ES: But there's always been diversity; the thing that's so great about Image is that the focus shifts regularly. Sure, it started off with Rob Liefeld, Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, Jim Valentino, Marc Silvestri, Erik Larsen and Whilce Portacio [doing superhero comics], but things changed as soon as they started inviting other writers and artists to join them.

With time, even what the original creators have done has changed – with the exception of Todd, who has always done *Spawn*, and Erik, who has always done *Savage Dragon*. But Marc

Ross proves his comic-writing talent...

Nextman: so militarily – but filmable – late.

...in AGP, the reality show gone bad.

started off doing *Cyberforce*, and in a couple of years he was doing *The Darkness* and *Witchblade* instead. Similarly, by the end of the first year you had Dale Keown on *The Pitt*, and Mike Grell doing *Shaman's Tears*. We kind of ebb and flow, depending on who's contributing at the time; it's one of the blessings and curses of image that it's all creator-owned, so we're only as strong as the people publishing with us.

CH: There has been a lot of talk recently about the importance of creators owning the properties they produce, but Image has always been at the forefront of this. Is everyone else just catching up?

ES: Well, *The Walking Dead* is a good example. It's become part of Robert Kirkman legend and lore that when he first started out in comics, he was deeply in debt, thanks to self-publishing through his Funkatron imprint.

The Walking Dead wasn't a guaranteed hit, because zombie comics didn't have a proven track record, but the fact that it's been as successful as it has means he's now laid out his next couple of decades in terms of royalties – all of it off the back of this one thing he created. It's very different to just doing work at Marvel and DC, which is great for now but doesn't necessarily yield long-term benefits.

CH: One thing Image gets little credit for is the new talent it's turned up: in the early days Michael Turner, David Finch and others, and more recently the likes of Kieron Gillen (*Phonogram*), Nick Spencer (*Morning Glories*) and Nathan Edmondson (*The Activity*), who've gone on to become Marvel and DC mainstays...

ES: ...And Robert Kirkman, who self-published but only became well-known through Image and *The Walking Dead*. That said, not many creators appear out of nowhere – you've got to learn your chops through trial and error. But then you get someone like Jonathan Hickman. We'd never heard of him before he sent us *The Nightly News*. I remember opening up the package and it was just amazing work. Indeed, it was not too different to what was published in the first issue – though, as I say, that's a rarity. But it's a great feeling when you luck across someone and go, 'Wow, this is a genuinely great talent!'

CH: Were you familiar with Jonathan Ross before agreeing to publish *Turf*?

ES: I definitely knew who he was, because I'd seen his TV show. Even before *Turf* he was probably better known in the comics world than he was in mainstream popular culture in America, because he'd done things like that BBC documentary on Steve Ditko. Jonathan was somebody who came to us, and he could obviously write, but he hadn't done comics before; he said he wanted criticism and feedback, and that's worked out pretty well. After *America's Got Powers* he's doing *The Golden Age* with Tommy Lee Edwards, which will be out later this year, and then *Run* with David Lafuente, which might be a 2013 book.

> **Image is creator-owned, so we're only as strong as the people publishing with us**

Saga is reviewed on page 107 this issue.

Secret Origins

Walter Simonson

His mighty run as writer/artist on Marvel's *Thor* is one of the most influential superhero texts of the modern era; but what forces shaped the young Walt? **By Jim McLauchlin**

Walter 'Walt' Simonson has just passed 'the Big Four-Oh'; no, not 40 years on this Earth, but rather four whole decades as a comic writer and artist, a remarkably consistent run in which he's rarely been other than one of the very top names in the field, known for his powerful visuals and mythic storylines. At times – notably with his '80s run on *The Mighty Thor* - virtually every other comic book creator was floundering in his wake.

Still, it's been a long road to this point – and not always an easy one. No pre-school fan, Simonson didn't even start reading comics until he was 19, discovering them while working on a paleontology degree – really! – at the prestigious Amherst College in Massachusetts. The medium seems to have hit him like a thunderbolt, mind, for he was to ditch his pick and shovel and pick up the pen and brush instead. Simonson soon advanced his degree at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and by 1973 was working for DC Comics, his first hit being a revival of the Manhunter character with writer Archie Goodwin. He was on his way.

Following stints on everything from *X-Factor* to *Fantastic Four*, *Wonder Woman* to Jack Kirby's *New Gods* – Simonson soon added 'remarkably versatile writer' to his skill set, and has pulled double-duty on many titles – he's recently returned to the very centre of the mainstream as artist on Marvel's best-selling, zeitgeist-troubling *Avengers* series, with Brian Michael Bendis.

But what heroes and inspirations shaped the man who, in turn, shaped much of what's great about modern superhero comics? The best way to find out is to ask him…

Photo by Joe Rittenhouse, Thor images © Marvel Comics

"I called my folks and told them paleontology was not for me"

2

1) Roy and Susan Simonson

"My dad was a soil scientist who travelled around the world studying the earth. I went to college as geology major, planning to become a paleontologist. But right at the end of my senior year I had one of those long, dark nights of the soul where you look out over the darkened quad on campus and realise that everything you thought was going to be your future isn't going to be. I could just see that this general direction was not, ultimately, where I wanted to go.

"I called my folks the next day and told them that paleontology was not going to be it for me.

"I moved back home with them for a time, re-thought what I was going to do, and came up with Rhode Island School of Design instead. My folks were completely supportive of this massive change in direction, I'd been going into a field very related to my dad's, but then totally went a different way, taking a career path that they really knew nothing about. We had a lot of talks about it all, and they could not have been more encouraging. And, in retrospect, it all worked out okay, right?"

2) Thomas Sgouros

"Tom was head of the Illustration Department at RISD when I was a

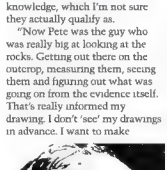
student. In his class, it became clear to me that what I liked was not just pictures, but words with pictures. When I was at RISD, no student up till then had ever done a comic as a degree project, but I ended up doing a junior project for Tom that became the first half of a 50-page comic that I wrote, drew, inked and lettered. It morphed into my senior thesis.

"Tom was always encouraging. Even though no one at RISD taught 'comics' at the time, I would stop by Tom's office with pages I was doing for my senior instructor, and he would look them over and call me on my mistakes. I'd have to eat some crow, but he was very gentle about it, nudging me to improve my work. He was a guide who led me to the idea of putting words and pictures together – and also led me to my initial understanding of picture-making, and what it required."

3) Dr Richard W. 'Pete' Tinsley

"He was my major professor in geology at Amherst College. He was a world traveller, all over the map. And he was a big fan of empirical evidence. That was a big influence on me. We are at a place now where we are developing the idea of 'knowledge by consensus'. Basically, anything you want to know, there's a poll on the web for. 'What do you like? What do you know? This? That? Yes? No?' And a lot of those opinions get put out there as if they're actual knowledge, which I'm not sure they actually qualify as.

"Now Pete was the guy who was really big at looking at the rocks. Getting out there on the outcrop, measuring them, seeing them and figuring out what was going on from the evidence itself. That's really informed my drawing. I don't 'see' my drawings in advance. I want to make decisions as I see the work developing in front of me. I find the drawing in the blank sheet of paper. I whittle it out. In a way, metaphorically, the search for empirical evidence is one of the most important things that Pete taught me."

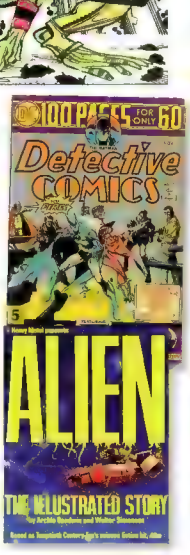


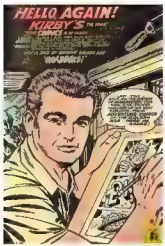
4) Carmine Infantino

"Carmine's the guy who was in charge of DC when I came to New York looking for work. I'd been turned down by a couple editors and I wound up seeing Carmine. I was just a kid out of art school with a portfolio and he was the editor-in-chief at DC! And I wound up, on a complete fluke through a totally accidental chain of events, sitting in his office with him going through my stuff. He liked the work a lot. And through his encouragement, several of his editors finally gave me some stories to draw – Joe Orlando was the first."

5) Archie Goodwin

"Not only did Archie give me the professional break [on *Manhunter* in Detective Comics] that really made my career, but he also taught me an enormous amount about storytelling. Nobody





could layer in exposition, that you needed to know as a reader to make the story work, and make it sound like normal conversation like Archie. His scripts were beautiful. I'm always in awe of his work; I strive to write as smoothly as Archie. He was so smooth that you were completely unaware of his mastery of the craft. I learned a lot from him.

"Recently, I had to write a complete script for a *Spirit* story for the Spanish artist Jordi Bernet. And I'd never written a full script before; everything I'd written had always been done 'Marvel-style'. But I knew how Archie did it, so I did my best to channel him. And it turned out great – and Jordi loved it. So, 40 years after we were on *Manhunter* together, Archie was still teaching me how to do this stuff. It doesn't get any better than that."

6) Stan Lee and Jack Kirby

"It's hard for me to separate these guys because they were together when I started reading comics.

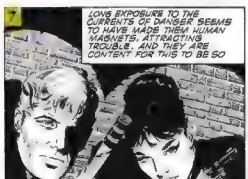
"I discovered Marvel Comics in 1965, when Stan and Jack were really hitting their stride, producing some of the best work in their respective careers to that point. *Thor* was my favourite, but I read everything Marvel put out – which was, like, 11 titles at the time. At 12 cents apiece, even a college student could afford that. I read everything, but the stuff Stan and Jack did together was always my favourite. Stan and Jack were my introduction to comics, and also to comic storytelling in general – and it appealed to me enormously. In a lot of ways that set the path for my future career, even though I didn't know it at the time. It's hard to overestimate how important they were to me."

7) Jim Holdaway

"Jim was the original artist on the *Modesty Blaise* newspaper strip, written by Peter O'Donnell. He died young, in 1970 aged just 43, and I think I'm still angry with him for dying.

"I discovered his work almost at the moment he died and I was just blown away. He was great, almost photographic yet using graphic abstraction, all at the same time.

"To this day, when I feel kind of dried out, he's the guy I go back to and look at to get unspired. I'll pull his books off the shelf and just be refreshed by the brilliance of it and how wonderful it all is.


LONG EXPOSURE TO THE CURRENTS OF DANGER SEEMS TO HAVE MADE THEM HUMAN MAGNETS, ATTRACTING TROUBLE. AND THEY ARE CONTENT FOR THIS TO BE SO

In terms of storytelling and composition, using this incredibly limited format of about three panels a day, Holdaway managed to make all his panels count. He's a big influence on my work. Even though I don't draw like him, those who have seen me work and watch the way I ink see a lot of Holdaway in it. He was very important to my development as an artist and a storyteller."

8) William L Coles, Jr

"I had William Coles as a freshman at Amherst, in the writing class. He was a short guy, kind of a firebrand. And he was just . great. As a teacher, he would rip things to shreds, but somehow do it in a way that never felt like a personal attack. He made you want to go back and do better.

"So, one evening in his office, he asked me if I'd read a book called *The Lord Of The Rings*. I hadn't – I'm not even sure I'd heard of it at the time. This was 1965, right before the book came out in paperback, so it wasn't very widely known.

"He loaned me his hardcover, I started reading and I was just blown away, freaking out over it. I thought it was fantastic. So Coles was the guy who introduced me to Tolkien, whose work very much became sort of a linchpin of how I tell stories ."

9) JRR Tolkien

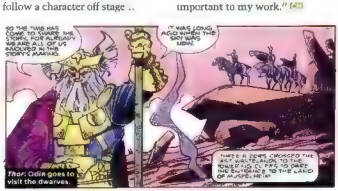
"For me, reading *The Lord Of The Rings* was like standing at the centre of a whole series of skeins of different characters and different situations, all woven together. You get the feeling that no matter what direction you walked out from the centre, you could follow any skein and it would have its own reality of undiscovered stories.

"And that's kind of how reality works. When you hang up this phone, you're 'gone' to me. But I know you're still there. I could go to your house, meet your family, see what you're doing. Tolkien did a wonderful job of creating a fictional world that had that feel.

"It's that richness of implied reality in Tolkien's fantasy world that I try to capture in my own work. I always try and layer in enough stuff so that, no matter what story I'm telling in front of you, there's the suggestion that if you could follow a character off stage .. well, he's got more stuff going on. I did a scene in my early *Thor* run – where Odin goes out and meets the dwarves who forged Mjolnir – and it's one of my favourite bits, because there are some implications in their conversation about the history of the gods and the dwarves that show that there's a past history at work.

"That approach – trying to create a wider world in the fictional universe – is an idea I got from Tolkien, and it's very important to my work." [8]

> **To this day, when I feel dried out, he's the guy I go back to**


SO THIS MAN HAS COME TO SHARE THE STORY, FOR ALREADY WE ARE ALL OF US INVOLVED IN THIS STORY'S MAKING.
IT WAS LONG AGO WHEN THE SKY WAS YOUNG.
THERE A DEMI-GODDESS CREATED THE SKY AND THE EARTH TO BE HER HOME AND SHE BUILDED A SEA TO BE HER LAND OF MUSIC AND LIGHT.
Thor: Odin goes to visit the dwarves

JUDGE JAMES'S COMICS COURTROOM

It's *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars*: the crossover event so awful, they did it twice. His Honour **Judge James Lovegrove** presides...

PROSECUTION: Secret Flaws.

DEFENCE: I beg your pardon?

PROSECUTION: Secret Bores.

DEFENCE: Oh, I see. My learned friend has decided to open his argument by making snide jokes at the expense of the accused. Very mature.

PROSECUTION: Secret Snores.

DEFENCE: Really, m'lud, must we put up with any more of this? Were we in a United States courtroom, I would be yelling 'Objection!' right now.

PROSECUTION: Forgive me, your honour, but the counsel for the defence seems to lack a sense of humour about Marvel's original *Secret Wars*. Mockery and scorn, however, are the only appropriate responses to this 12-issue maxiseries from 1984, and its nine-issue sequel which followed a mere three months afterward. No one can deny that *Secret Wars* is anything but one of the lamest nags ever to limp out of the Marvel stable.

DEFENCE: *Secret Wars* was, on the contrary, the realisation of every Marvelite's dream – a grand-scale crossover epic utilising almost all of the company's flagship characters. Marvel had already tested the waters with *Contest Of Champions*, a three-issue miniseries in which two squads of assorted superheroes are pitted against each other. *Secret Wars* amplified the concept, having numerous heroes and villains whisked away from earth by an omnipotent entity, The Beyonder, and relocated to a specially made 'battleworld'. From then on it's action all the way, a massive free-for-all slugfest.

PROSECUTION: Action? Well, yes – if by that you mean a virtually plot-free parade of squabbling and scrapping. The Beyonder's aim is to discover what makes humanity tick and bring some meaning to his own godlike existence. Given how his experiment turns out, he must surely conclude that being human entails posturing a lot, spouting inane and barely coherent dialogue and forming vague alliances that invariably fall apart.

DEFENCE: There are moments of narrative tension. The Beyonder trouncing Galactus without even trying, for one. The prickly relationship between the mutant heroes and the rest of the cast, for another. The vicious beating that She-Hulk receives courtesy of The Wrecking Crew, Doctor Octopus and The Absorbing Man, for a third.

PROSECUTION: There are moments of unintentional hilarity, too. She-Hulk's '80s slang, for instance: 'Oh wow! That was, like tubular, you know – to the max!' Not to mention her legwarmers. Writer Jim Shooter had produced decent scripts before, and would do so again, but *Secret Wars* seemed to bring out the worst in him.

DEFENCE: What about the artwork? Mike Zeck provides good, solid layouts and John Beatty inks them well.

PROSECUTION: I'm glad my learned friend brought up the subject of artwork. Let us turn our attention to *Secret Wars II*. A prestige project, one would have thought; after all, the first series sold well, in spite of its questionable quality. So who does Marvel appoint? John Byrne? George Pérez? Frank Miller? No. Al Milgrom, that's who.

The nine-issue sequel wasn't much better.
MARVEL
SECRET WARS II
"THE BEYONDER" BERSERK!
SECRET WARS
The Beyonder? Less fearsome, more farcical.
SECRET WARS
HOT DAMN!
I'M A LIVING GOD!
I'M A LIVING GOD!
I'M A LIVING GOD

1

Artist Profile

INFO Sophisticated, elegant and ambitious from the off

LOCATION Portland, Oregon, USA

WEBSITE mattwagnercomics.com

THE ART OF... Matt Wagner

Joel Meadows meets a man who's renowned for his elegant art – and as one of comicdom's most assured and inventive storytellers

Few talents have hit the ground running quite like Matt Wagner, whose visual storytelling had a certain swagger from the off. He appeared, as if from nowhere, with unusual self-confidence and skill on two ambitious, sophisticated original series for suburban Philadelphia start-up Comico (one of a raft of cocky independents – Eclipse was another, Pacific a third – that livened up the early '80s funnybook scene). Both took the idea of superheroes and twisted it on its ear.

Mage: The Hero Discovered was a bold, broad-brushstroke reworking of classic mythic motifs, set in contemporary blue-collar America. Heavy black backgrounds abound as Kevin Matchstick (a clear self-parody; names, as with much else here, skip the line between twee and quirky in enjoyable fashion) romped his way though a fast-paced, eccentric rewrite of Arthurian legend, with Excalibur now a baseball bat and Merlin a droll Rubik's Cube fan called Mirth.

Grendel was darker, but showed a similar storytelling confidence that – for a while – outstripped the rapidly-developing Wagner's artistic chops. Mixing horror, superheroes and kitchen sink realism in near equal measure, it told of a dangerous demonic force that possesses ordinary folk, giving them the ability to fix (or, as likely, further mess up) their troubled lives with ultraviolent might-makes-right power. *Grendel* is still going in fits and starts – a long and complicated adventure with serious intent – but to many Wagner's best-known for his extensive DC work, not least as writer of *Sandman Mystery Theatre* at the dark fantasy Vertigo imprint, and assorted books featuring the company's biggest superhero guns…

COMIC HEROES: Your first professional work was for Comico, where you created the weird and dark *Grendel*. Where did that come from?

MATT WAGNER: It was the early '80s and independent publishing seemed all the rage. Concerns about creator ownership – and a desire to provide a wider range of subject matter and styles – spurred a whole wave of ambition and, with the advent of the direct sales market, it suddenly seemed possible to break the Big Two's stranglehold on the industry.

I was at art school at the time and I'd met some like-minded pals who wanted to start an independent comics publishing company. In time, they brought that scheme to fruition as Comico, and offered me the chance to come up with a character. With *Grendel*, I was attempting something rather bold for the time: a title character who was, in fact, the bad guy. This was long before the flood of grim and morally ambiguous characters that now seem to pervade our market, and a story about an affirmed criminal hadn't really been attempted before in the US, aside from a few short-lived efforts.

Both *Mage* and *Grendel* are an amalgam of several different genres. In the case of *Grendel*, I was incorporating my love of horror and crime fiction, along with the superhero motif of a masked adventurer. It was also about this time that Japanese anime and manga were first making inroads on the Western comics scene, and I was somewhat enamoured with the look and style of that genre too.

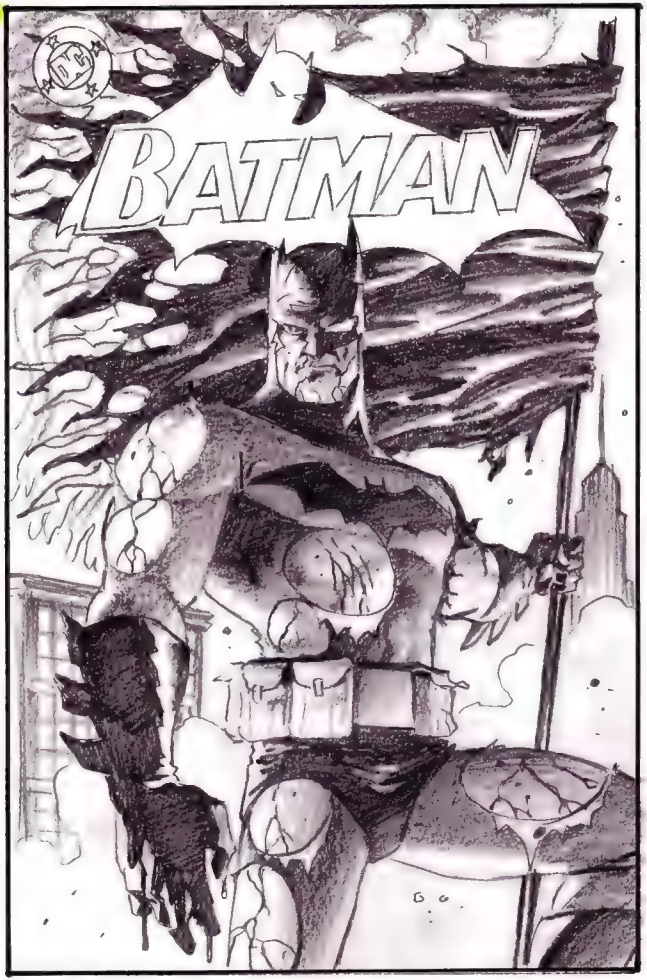
In those early black-and-white issues of *Grendel* you can clearly see that influence. Luckily, though, I wasn't very good at aping the look, and the results were somewhat muddled – which forced me to readdress how I approached my art. When Comico finally made the move into colour comics, I was again given the opportunity to develop a continuing storyline, and that eventually became *Mage*. At that point, I considered *Grendel* as an aborted first effort, and was content to let it die but I was given a new direction when I started hearing back from fans that they wanted to see a continuation of the storyline.

CH: *Mage* is much-loved too, of course, but we haven't seen any new adventures for Kevin Matchstick in well over ten years…

Wagner Gallery

1 ZORRO #3

"I've always loved Zorro. He's the absolute prototype of the contemporary, masked adventurer – and he's a hero through and through. That's a surprisingly rare commodity in our favourite medium these days. Comics used to exemplify heroic ideals, but for the past 20 years they've seemed obsessed with deconstructing the entire concept as something hollow or vain. The heroes at Marvel and DC seem to spend more time fighting each other these days than any villainous threat. So, when I got the opportunity to put my spin on Zorro, I leapt at the chance. I wanted to tell a simpler kind of tale and yet give Zorro's stories a bit more edge in order to show the depth of his courage. He is, after all, one man taking on an entire corrupt system. I'm particularly proud of this cover – I think it captures the lone hero in a Western setting; it feels like a man on a serious mission. In keeping with the simpler times I was trying to evoke, we elected to list no creative credits: aside from the company bullet, the only graphic on the cover is the declarative title – ZORRO!"


BATMAN

MW: I obviously managed to strike a chord with quite a few readers through *Mage*, on both a mythic and a personal level. I think that's testament to the success I had internalising the key elements of the mythic Hero's Journey, and turning it into an autobiographical allegory. On one level, that's not so very new: cartoonists of all stripes have been basing their narratives not only on their own world-views, but also their very lives, for many, many years. But I chose to adopt a literary alter-ego very deliberately, and the effect must have been striking, since people are still fans of the series and its sequel, and are faithfully awaiting the final, third volume of the trilogy. Sadly, I can't say exactly when that momentous event will occur.

CH: Your work for DC has seen you tackle its most iconic heroes in series such as *Trinity* and *Monster Men*. What is it about Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman that appeals?
MW: On one level, it's sheer nostalgia. As a kid, I lived out in the country and couldn't get comics all the time so I gravitated towards DC since, generally speaking, their stories were self-contained, and each new adventure concluded in every issue – unlike at Marvel, where the stories seemed to continue like a soap opera. As a young reader that was not only frustrating, it was confusing. Plus, my parents were both World War 2-era folks, so I inherited a nostalgia for that time and all that it produced.

It's hard to deny that DC's big three icons are just that: iconic and archetypal. Since they were among the first of their kind, they were moulded out of unfettered ideas. Most of the modern Marvel characters, on the other hand, were reactions to the long-standing traditions of superhero narrative that had been established over the preceding 30 years; they were heroes who didn't seem quite so perfect. But the DC characters sprang from the desperate Depression-era yearnings of their creators.

CH: You began your career as a writer/artist, but these days you seem to do one or the other as often as you do both. Why?

MW: The fact that I've spent so much of the past several years as a writer isn't by any sort of specific design; I just seem to have fallen into it by chance. Truthfully, I don't think there's much difference between the two tasks – it's all storytelling, and that's what I consider my profession.

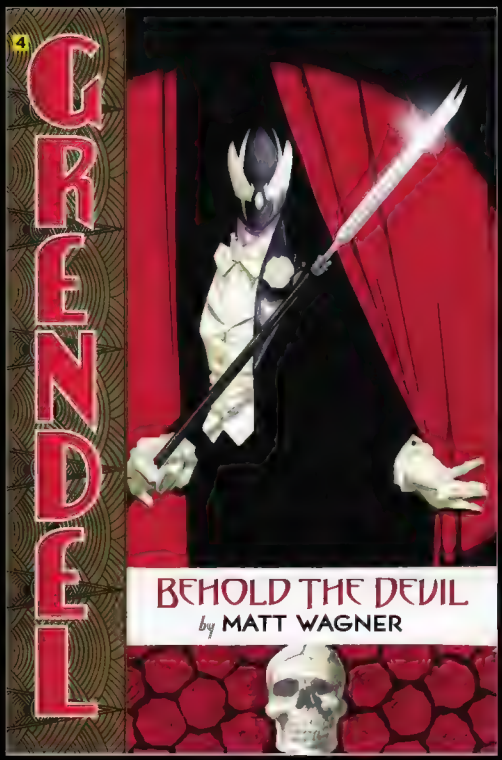
CH: You seem drawn to grand themes: *Mage* has its roots in Arthurian legend, while *Grendel*, too, touches on mythology – and the nature of evil. What is it that draws you to such things?
MW: I've always liked iconic characters and narratives, and that started quite young for me,

Wagner Gallery

BATMAN #633

"Whenever I'm working on a cover, be it for my own creations or a more mainstream title, I like to consider how the logo will play into and affect the design of the final product. To do this, I usually do a quick tracing of the logo and company bullet, and then run off a bunch of these 'blanks' on my Xerox machine so I can use them for the prelim sketches. If I'm doing a fully painted piece for the cover art, I tend to do a much more finished sketch than if the final art is to be simple line drawing. This allows me to set the tones, shading and light source at the pencil stage, before I start applying paint. I've always found the standard Batman logo a bit of a challenge to work around, due to the backing graphic on which the actual title rests. In effect, this graphic means that Batman is depicted on every cover twice, a factor that really needs to be considered in the earliest design stages. The Batman figure in the art needs to overwhelm the silhouette in the logo."

3
BIZARRO NO LIKE GOLDEN BUGS IN HEAD.
NO LIKE LADY WITH ROPE.
LADY WITH ROPE BROKE BIZARRO'S BADGE!
BIZARRO AM RACER COOL'S NUMBER ONE FRIEND!
BIZARRO AM NUMBER ONE!



with myths, legends and fairytales. I was raised in a fairly standard religious household, but tended to view Biblical stories as no different to the grand adventures found in Greek and Norse legend. As time went on, and my understanding of these timeless tales deepened, I began to realise the inherent truths behind such narratives – and how these sorts of story structures seemed to be hardwired into our collective human consciousness.

CH: At one point, *Grendel* was being written and drawn by a selection of other top comic creators. How did this come about?

MW: I first elected to work with those other artists in order to broaden my own artistic outlook. I was still pretty young and green when I first opened up my creation to different visual interpretations, and I couldn't have been more pleased with the results. At this point, I've worked with so many different artists – and have seen so many other interpretations of the character – that I now have a very broad scope of what I consider to be 'Grendel'.

I've always tried to write to each artist's particular strengths, and over the years we've created a narrative tableau of such broad visual variation that, I'd have to say, is basically

Wagner Gallery

3 TRINITY #3

"*Trinity* tells the story of how DC's Big Three icons first came together. I created a threat comprised of a trio of the main characters' dark opposites. I wanted to treat Bizarro as monstrous and frightening rather than comical and silly and this scene from the second issue is a chilling depiction of Bizarro running amok. Wonder Woman makes the mistake of snaring him with her golden lasso, sending him into a berserker rage. I really like how scary this image is: Bizarro looks completely insane, and his unlucky opponent looks really messed up. I took some heat from Wonder Woman fans who like to consider her Superman's physical equal. At the very least she's not impervious like Superman – otherwise, why would she need to deflect bullets with her bracelets? To my mind, the fact that she even survives such a beating marks her as one really tough Amazon."

4 GRENDEL: BEHOLD THE DEVIL

"This is one of my favourites, the cover of the trade collection of *Grendel: Behold The Devil*, an all-new series I wrote and illustrated to commemorate Grendel's 25th anniversary. Grendel is often more of a collaborative effort – I write the adventures for other artists – but for this auspicious occasion I returned to depict an 'untold tale' involving the original incarnation of the Grendel persona, Hunter Rose. This cover follows the template I'd designed for the series itself. I wanted to avoid the typical comic book design motif of having the title blare across the top third or so of the cover; instead, I opted to stack the Grendel logo vertically in a design strip that ran down the left-hand side. The original Hunter Rose storyline, 'Devil By The Deed', was a design-heavy narrative, and the character evokes a sense of danger combined with elegance. I really like how this piece captures all of those elements – as well as plays with the story's title, as Grendel steps out from behind the curtain. Behold!"

Wagner Gallery

5 GREEN ARROW #10

"As the cover artist on a mainstream book, I almost never get to read the actual script, or see the interior art, since the cover is required so far in advance for solicitation. Usually I work from a one or two-sentence description, by either the editor or writer. So, for *Green Arrow #10*, I was simply told to have the two Green Arrows (Oliver Queen and his son Connor Hawke) poised back-to-back with their bows drawn. I worked out a figure composition that I liked, but I needed some more information in order to set the background and tone – just where was this supposed to be happening? Unfortunately, Kevin Smith was the writer on this book and his latest movie was just about to premiere, so he was insanely busy doing PR junkets. Finally, I decided to go ahead anyway, and make this shot an urban rooftop scene with an indigo sky and a few leaves lilting by in the wind."

6 GREEN ARROW #10

"Unfortunately, literally the day after I finished the first painting, I heard back from Kevin Smith during one of his free moments on the publicity trail; it was an email that said something like: "It's a hot battle scene: they're locked in a dungeon and surrounded by a swirling mass of demons." In other words, not only was the setting and tone I had chosen wrong, it was *completely* wrong! At the time, Kevin's presence as the writer on the book had created quite a stir, making *Green Arrow* DC's #1 selling book. And this issue was the dramatic climax to his first story arc, so I felt like I had to get this right. So I bit the bullet and started over, changing the colour tone of the entire piece and adding the shadowy demon shapes to the swirling colours in the background. Much to my happy surprise, DC actually paid for both versions – and later used the quieter piece as the cover for *Green Arrow: Secret Files And Origins*. Looking at the two pieces side-by-side shows what a dramatic difference colour can have on the final tone and atmosphere of a painting."

unmatched in the world of comics. Funny thing is, I love seeing how other people interpret *Grendel* – but the complete opposite is true of *Mage*.

CH: Madame Xanadu, a DC character you reinvented for an ongoing Vertigo series in 2008, was the victim of a company shuffle last year, when DC decided to shift her back to the mainstream Universe. You must have been disappointed with that, surely?

MW: I'm very proud of what we accomplished on that book – especially since I never really wanted to write it in the first place. My long-time buddy Bob Schreck had just started as an editor at Vertigo, and approached me about working a revamp of Madame Xanadu – I thought he was nuts. He then went on to explain that he had a hot young artist lined up, in whom he saw a lot of potential – this turned out to be Amy Reeder – who he thought needed the guiding influence of an experienced storyteller like me, preferably one who had some history working with fledgling talents.

At first, I wasn't that attracted to the character, or the concept, but I eventually found the emotional core I needed to bring her some new life and develop a more contemporary portrayal. I'm a bit of a history buff, so dealing with a character that has lived for centuries really appealed to me – and, since I'm always looking for a challenge, it was great to try my hand at what proved to be the most feminine project I've ever handled.

Aside from one storyline we did with Michael Kaluta – who, after all, invented the character's original look and has an established history of working with strong female characters – all the artists were women, and each brought a wonderful and unique visual approach to the series. My one regret is that Kaluta wanted to do another stint on the book, and I had a really great idea for his second arc, but, alas, that never happened.

CH: How much do you draw digitally these days and how much is still done by hand?

MW: I'm still totally old-school – pencils, pens, paint and brushes – which makes me feel a bit antiquated at times. But there's a sensual quality to those mediums that I absolutely love. Not to downplay the power and importance of digital rendering here, but I'm happier with the more traditional mediums.

My approach varies from project to project but, in the case of a sequential narrative, I tend to work with a very basic flowchart. I block out a series of little rectangles that comprise the total pages I have to work with – in the case of a monthly comic, 22 pages at a shot – then I jot down very simplistic notes that let me work through the pace of how the chapter or story unfolds. And, really, that's about it. I want every stage to be fresh and lively.

I take this sort of approach even further when I work on *Mage*. With that, I don't do any layouts or write anything down – I simply take blank pages and start drawing, letting the story take me where it wants to go. I like the spontaneity of this approach; it really does become a Hero's Journey, for me, in that sense.

CH: Are there many writers you'd be happy to collaborate with as an artist these days?

MW: Even though I've worked with many artists over the years, I've only had a handful of writers – but it's been a pretty talent-packed bunch: Neil Gaiman, James Robinson, Steven T Seagle, Kevin Smith, Brian Michael Bendis, Greg Rucka. Not a bad pedigree, I'd say! As with the artists, I've worked with these writers in an effort to expand my understanding of my own style, and storytelling in general. These days, though, I can only think of one or two writers with whom I'd really like to collaborate.

Generally, I feel great about my career. I've enjoyed a long and wide-ranging series of opportunities, and I've done pretty much everything in my own fashion and to satisfy my own interests. I've maintained my 'indy' cred, and never felt like I've 'sold out', yet I've managed to dance within the mainstream market on many, many occasions. I always felt – and continue to feel – like I've done things my own way.

SPECIAL SFX EDITION

PRESENTS

And the winner is...

INSIDE 3 FREE GIFTS!

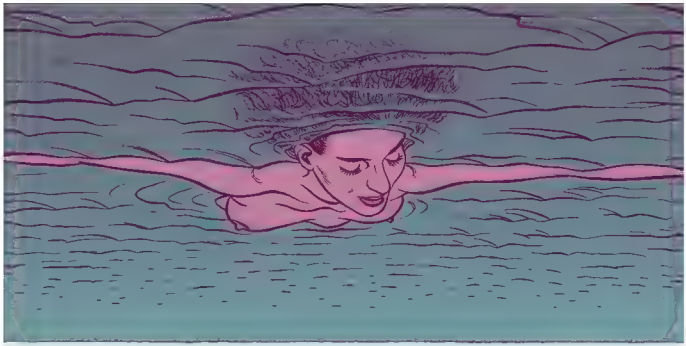
OFFICIAL 2001 POSTER ★ SFX MOUSE MAT

CLASSIC SCI-FI MOVIE STICKERS

ON SALE NOW!

Now available on iPhone or iPad.
http://bit.ly/INAWVA

Scan Here!



SAND CASTLE

Frederik Peeters
Pierre Oscar Lévy

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

Autobiography, science fiction, crime, surrealism – whatever the genre, the versatile Swiss graphic novelist Frederik Peeters sidesteps formulas to keep surprising himself as much as his readers. By Paul Gravett

In the classic film *The Third Man*, Orson Welles' sinister character Harry Lime jibes, "In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

Unfair! In fact, Switzerland can also lay claim to 'inventing' comics thanks to the pioneering albums of Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846), a teacher in Geneva. Nearly two centuries later, the Swiss capital is home to a thriving graphic novel community and Frederik Peeters is one of its most daring exponents.

To avoid becoming clichéd or overprepared, Peeters prefers leaping into the unknown with each fresh project, whether in his candid, compelling breakthrough *Blue Pills* (available in English from Jonathan Cape), his unsettling time-warp tale *Sandcastle* or his forthcoming psychodrama *Pachyderme* (both from Self Made Hero). During a recent visit to London, he discussed his career to date – and things to come.

Comic Heroes: We first came across your comics in the Swiss anthology *Bile Noire* ('Black Bile') from Editions Atrabile; good stuff, but not the most upbeat of titles, surely?

Frederik Peeters: That's true! 'Atrabile' is the ancient word for the liquid in the body that was thought to cause melancholy, based on the theory of humours. We began making fanzines in a basement when we were 18 and things evolved. Atrabile, founded in 1997, remains a very small structure with just three. We made cheap books and then very expensive books. I didn't go to art school. I got a degree in Latin – useful for English and because I was passionate about history.

Then, after that, I got a degree in visual communication – which was totally useless. I never got near a pencil; it was all on computers and about marketing and so on. I drew when I was a child, like every child; the difference is that I never stopped! My mother has comics I made when I was seven, so I was already in the business of telling my whole life story. It was very boring, though, so after four pages I became a superhero.

Opposite page: *Sandcastle* was nominated for the Grand Prix at the celebrated Angoulême International Comics Festival recently

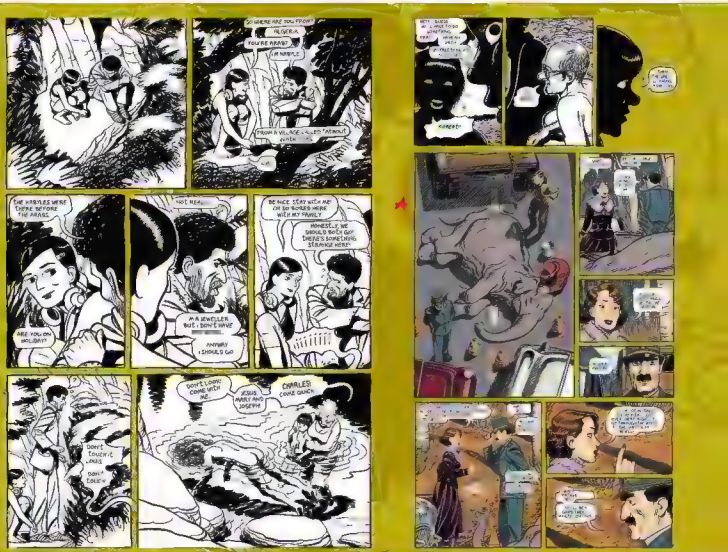
CH: Years later, of course, you *did* tell the story of your life in *Blue Pills*. It came out in 2001 and was a brave autobiography about falling in love with a woman who is HIV positive.

FP: *Blue Pills* was not supposed to be a book. I'd just finished working on *Miettes* ('Crumbs'), a completely absurd story by Ibn Al Rabin about Swiss cowboys, and I wanted to cleanse and challenge myself. I needed a very close, obvious subject to draw fast, without the need for pencilling, writing directly in the comic strip language. I made the first 35 pages just for me.

I was perplexed about what to do with them so I showed them to Daniel Pellegrino at Atrabile. He said, 'Don't change anything and if you need 500 pages we'll publish it.' That's because he's not a publisher, he's a friend!

CH: No pencils? That's an odd way to work?

FP: My method hasn't changed. I always write directly onto the page, with no script. I write and then I storyboard as I go – sometimes page by page, sometimes sequence by sequence, but never planned ahead to the end. If »


WHERE ARE YOU FROM?
ALGERIA
YOU'RE ARAB?
A NEGRO?
FROM A VILLAGE ALLED TATAOUIT
THE ARABLES WERE THERE BEFORE THE ARABS
ARE YOU AN ARAB?
NOT REALLY...
I'M A JEWELLER BUT I DON'T HAVE ANYMORE
ANYWAY I SHOULD GO
BE NICE, STAY WITH ME I'M SO BORED HERE WITH MY FAMILY
HMMMM... WE SHOULD WATCH OUT THERE'S SOMETHING STRANGE HERE!
DON'T TOUCH ME, LOUIS
DON'T TOUCH LOUIS
DON'T COME WITH ME
JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH
CHARLES! COME BACK!
NOT BAD! WE WOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO EAT!
HOW DO YOU SAY?
HUNGRY!
I'M NOT HUNGRY, I'M STARVING!
I'M NOT HUNGRY, I'M STARVING!
I'M NOT HUNGRY, I'M STARVING

“I like getting lost in space with the characters, and finding home in the end”

because she doesn't move in the same way, so I had my life model at home.

CH: How did your collaboration in 2010 on *Sandcastle*, with French documentary film-maker Pierre Oscar Lévy, come about?

FP: Pierre called me because *Blue Pills* was love at first sight for him and he wanted to buy the movie rights. As part of his research, he came to our home to film us for two days. It was hard not to become a friend. He was 14 in 1968 in Paris, and throwing cobblestones at the cops. He's a crazy, intellectual, left-wing French Jew and he helped me discover many interesting ideas, films and books.

Later, Pierre said he'd written something especially for me. I prefer writing my own stories, but agreed to read it and was immediately hooked. He'd written *Sandcastle* like a movie script, complete with dialogue and set descriptions. It had a complete ending, but I felt it became less interesting when it was all explained, so I left it out. It's a tale about the fourth dimension, with a strong socio-critical and philosophical side to it.

CH: Your next book, out in English this October, is *Pachyderme*.

FP: This is my homage to American comedy movies of the '30s and '40s, though I don't have the same level of wit as Billy Wilder.

It's about a woman, a pianist, who is married to a diplomat in Switzerland in the '50s and can't have children, and a virtuoso alcoholic surgeon, who is a seducer and decadent. Something happens to her husband and she takes the opportunity to reclaim her freedom. *Pachyderme* is like a three-legged chair: it's not comfortable or easy, but I hope it leaves a lasting impression. It hovers between romanticism, espionage and dreamlike symbolism, and it's quite surreal with lots of illusions, so it's another of my experiments.

Above *Pachyderme* – not an easy read but it should give you lots to think about

CH: And right now you're immersed in yet another experiment with *Aama*.

FP: Yes, my publishers Gallimard don't really do sci-fi, so I pitched *Aama* as a new genre, blending hyper-technology with true sci fi but written in a literary style, with lots of text.

Gallimard has let me run with this story but, unlike with *Lupus*, I have a clear ending in mind. In fact, I've used it as the starting point – like in Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* – by showing the character flat on the ground, weeping, his memory gone, and then going into flashbacks, explaining how it happened. It might sell well in the UK, because it features a monkey-robot named Churchill!

Sandcastle *and* ***Pachyderme*** *are both available from Self Made Hero,* ***Blue Pills*** *from Jonathan Cape*

www.imaginefx.com

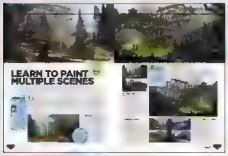
FANTASY & SCI-FI DIGITAL ART

ImagineFX

IN THIS ISSUE...

RISING STARS 2012 Enter our art competition and be seen by Marvel's CB Cebulski

INTERVIEWS Joe Madureira talks Battle Chasers, Spider-Man and video games



WORKSHOPS Digital art techniques and drawing skills revealed in easy-to-follow steps

ON SALE IN TESCO, BORDERS, WHSMITH AND BARNES & NOBLE!

Improve your

MANGA ART

valuable art advice from the world's leading manga artists

Plus

FREE DVD 21 & 3D ... **NEWS** **REVIEWS**
TRADITIONAL ART ... AND LOTS, LOTS MORE...

We're available as **digital editions**
iPad, iPhone, iPod touch: www.bit.ly/ifx-app
Android, PC/Mac: www.zinio.com/imaginefx
Barnes & Noble Nook: www.bit.ly/ifxnook

DIGITAL PAINTING • GAME ART • DRAWING SKILLS • COMICS & MANGA

COMIC HEROES' RATINGS AND VERDICTS

REVIEWS

RATINGS EXPLAINED

BRILLIANT	★★★★★
GOOD	★★★★
AVERAGE	★★★
PRETTY POOR	★★
RUBBISH!	★

THIS ISSUE

COMICS

Absalom: Ghosts Of London	118
Batman: Knightfall	106
Best Of Enemies	116
DC round-up	102
Flex Mentallo	114
Largo Winch	108
Lucky Luke	108
Marvel round-up	104
Saga	107
Severed	110
Six Guns	118
Small Press round-up	112
Spandex: Fast And Hard	114
Spooks: The Fall Of Babylon	108
Supercrooks	111
The Case Of Charles Dexter Ward	116
The Rainbow Orchid	110
The Secret Service	111
The Shadow	106
The Wolf Man	116
Valerian And Laureline	108

“Get all the comics reviewed in this issue from Comic Domain!”

COMIC HEROES REVIEWS SPONSORED BY

ComicDomain.co.uk

Your online comic shop

DC ROUND-UP

The New 52's 'Second Wave' hits, and some books strike harder than others...

DIAL H
WRITER: China Miéville
ARTIST: Mateus Santolouco
OUT: Now
★★★★☆

BATMAN INCORPORATED
WRITER: Grant Morrison
ARTIST Chris Burnham
OUT: Now
★★★★★

EARTH 2
WRITER: James Robinson
ARTISTS: Nicola Scott and Trevor Scott
OUT: Now
★★★☆☆

WORLD'S FINEST
WRITER: Paul Levitz
ARTISTS: George Perez, Kevin Maguire and Scott Koblish
OUT: Now
★★★

GI COMBAT
WRITERS: JT Krul, Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti
ARTISTS: Aniel Olivetti and Dan Panosian
OUT: Now
★★★☆☆

After the relative calm of the first few months of 2012, May's Second Wave has brought a tsunami of new titles to the New 52, some of which will swim admirably while others inevitably sink.

Out of the six debuts, the newly abbreviated *Dial H*'s revival of obscure '60s book *Dial H For Hero* has been one of the most eagerly anticipated – not because its fanbase is huge, but because it marks multiple Arthur C Clarke Award-winning novelist China Miéville's first stint on a monthly comic book title.

A childhood favourite that he's apparently always longed to write, *Dial H* sees the Londoner prove himself to be just as adept at comic scripts as he is at prose, never over-cluttering panels with too much exposition and allowing the action plenty of room to breathe.

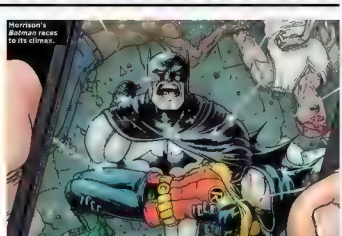
With no sign of the original *Dial H For Hero*'s main protagonist Robbie Reynolds so far, this take sees overweight loser Nelse make for an unlikely but engaging central figure. Miéville imbues him with a gentle nobility and a subversive sense of humour, while his friendship with lowly hood-um Darren is genuinely touching.

Deliberately sidestepping the digital advances of 21st century telephony, Nelse pointedly uses an ancient phone box to inadvertently transform into 'Boy Chimney' – a phantasmagoric creation that wouldn't be out of place in one of Miéville's esoteric urban fantasy novels – and then the melancholic Captain Lachrymose, both in the opening issue.

Not to be outdone by Brian Bolland's truly surreal cover, Mateus Santolouco brings emotion to the quieter moments of the tale proper, while cutting loose impressively when required. Betraying more than a passing debt to Darick Robertson, a local mob boss' resemblance to *Transmetropolitan*'s Spider Jerusalem is a smart tip of the hat. If Santolouco and Miéville maintain this impressive quality, we'll soon be dialling 'H for Hit'.

Not so much a relaunch but a seamless continuation of the first volume, which ended last year, *Batman Incorporated* will probably not make much sense if you haven't read the previous series – and even if you're familiar with the globetrotting Bat-book a refresher is probably required.

Beginning with a portentous prelude hinting that the Dark Knight is heading for an almighty fall, Morrison then plunges straight



“Morrison drops plenty of tantalising clues as to how this 12-parter will play out”

into the action as Bats and Robin chase a band of goat-headed thugs through an abattoir, providing artist Chris Burnham and colourist Nathan Fairbairn with some gut-wrenchingly bloody scenes to get to grips with.

Suggesting an unholy comb nation of Geoff Darrow and Frank Quitely, Burnham's highly detailed kinetic linework is perfectly suited to Morrison's labyrinth ne, carefully layered script. Emphasis ng the frosty relationsh p between Bruce Wayne and his malevolent son Damian, who makes for a more sinister Robin than usual. Morrison drops plenty of tanta ising clues as to how this 12-parter will play out.

WORLDS APART

Earth 2 has recently garnered p enty of feverish attention for #2's b g reveal that Alan Scott is gay but – spoilers beware! – there are p enty of surpr ses in #1 as well. A clever variation of Geoff Johns and Jim Lee's inaugural JLA arc last year, James Robinson's intriguing story is mostly dedicated to this alternate world s Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, who make the ultimate sacrifice as they attempt to save their planet, while feisty sidekicks Supergirl and Robin disappear down a boom-tube.

Robinson provides brief glimpses of lovelorn Flash-to-be Jay Garrick, Atom-in-waiting Al Pratt and future Green Lantern Alan Scott, whose emerald shirt neatly winks towards his superheroic destiny – if not his sexuality. But with so many pages dedicated to setting up the book's gnm premise, this trio struggles to make anything but a fleeting impression. Still, it's good to see DC embracing its infinite multiverses once again.

It's advisable to read *Earth 2* before delving into *World's Finest*, which picks up where Robinson left off with Supergirl and Robin – who have now assumed the identities of Power Girl and Huntress – adjusting to life n the main DC Universe. Enhanced by George Perez's classical y detailed art (but let down by a terrible Power Girl costume), Paul Levitz's solid script begins in the present-day DC Universe with Karen Starr and Helena Wayne lunching at a Tokyo restaurant, before rushing off to a suspicious fire at a nearby laboratory.

It then flashes back five years to the pair's formative years on their home world, which is brought to life by Kevin Maguire and Scott Kolkish's more cartoonish approach. Like *Earth 2* before it, *World's Finest* will probably take several issues to get into its fu l stride, but this, nevertheless, is a promising first offering.

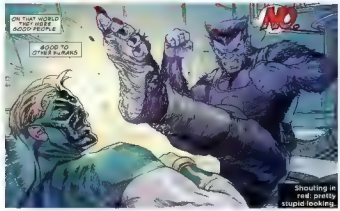
WAR IS HELL

Previously home to the ikes of *Haunted Tank*, DC's latest incarnation of *GI Combat* is home to two strips, the centuries-spanning *The War That Time Forgot* and *The Unknown Soldier*, wh ch was last revived in 2008 under the Vertigo banner.

Shift ng the action to current day Afghanistan – and depicting the ‘suicidal k l ing machine’ as a kind of post-9/11 Punisher whose family is k l ed during the 2005 London tube bombings – Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti's *The Unknown Soldier* is the more compelling of the two stories, with Dan Panosian's sketchy style complement ng the gritty script.

In contrast, JT Krul's tale of a warsh p dropp ng through a Bermuda Triangle-esque t mewarp to a prehistoric era, where ts crew encounters some angry tyrannosauruses and pterodactyls, seems woefu ly thn – and geared more towards provid ng suitable opportunities for Ariel Olivetti's impressive full-page splashes than advancing the narrative. Wh e Ol vett 's delicate pa nted art is easy on the eye you have to say said action sequences aren't all that either – they're far too st lted.

Offering such a mixed bag, *GI Combat* would appear to have a struggle on ts hands if it's not to become one of the Second Wave s first casualties. **Stephen Jewell**



MARVEL ROUND-UP

Marvel thinks it knows what you want this summer: everybody fighting everybody, once again...

AVENGERS VS X-MEN

WRITERS: Jason Aaron, Brian Michael Bendis, Ed Brubaker, Matt Fraction and Jonathan Hickman
ARTISTS: John Romita Jr and Scott Hanna
OUT: Now
★★★★

AVX: VS

WRITERS: Jason Aaron, Kathryn Immonen, Kieron Gillen and Steve McNiven
ARTISTS: Adam Kubert, Stuart Immonen, Salvador Larroca, Steve McNiven and John Dell
OUT: Now
★★★

THE NEW AVENGERS

WRITER: Brian Michael Bendis
ARTIST: Mike Deodato
OUT: Now
★★★★

THE AVENGERS

WRITER: Brian Michael Bendis
ARTISTS: Walt Simonson and Scott Hanna
OUT: Now
★★★

SECRET AVENGERS

WRITER: Rick Remender
ARTIST: Renato Guedes
OUT: Now
★★★

UNCANNY X-MEN

WRITER Kieron Gillen
ARTIST: Greg Land
OUT: Now
★★★

Whose side are *you* on? Yes, Marvel is asking *that* old question again, a slightly disappointing premise for this summer's crossover blockbuster, even if the reasoning behind it is perfectly understandable.

Given the box office-smashing performance of Joss Whedon's astonishing Avengers movie – and the not-quite-so stellar, but still more than respectable, success of last summer's *X-Men: First Class* – it makes perfect sense for the House of Ideas to pit their two leading team franchises against each other.

It makes Scott Summers Marvel's current could-pick-a-fight-in-an-empty-room champ, going eyeball-to-eyeball with old pal Wolverine in last autumn's *X-Men: Schism* storyline, and now putting his particular brand of one-eyed fanaticism up against Cap A's more bigoted sort diplomacy.

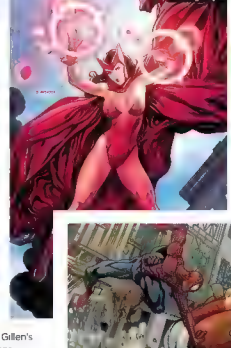
Significantly, as the first four-issue act of the storyline's 12-issue limited series 'mothership' draws to a close, Wolverine's shifting loyalties have provided one of the more intriguing elements of the unfolding drama, one which has seen the malevolent Phoenix Force finally return to Earth – presumably to join up with its intended new host, the so-called 'mutant messiah' Hope.

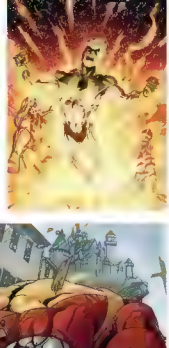
From Latveria to Wundagore Mountain, the Savage Land to the far reaches of outer space, Jason Aaron, Brian Michael Bendis, Ed Brubaker, Matt Fraction and Jonathan Hickman have each contributed to an engrossing (but unbelievably conflict-heavy) plot that occasionally finds time to take in the odd quiet moment too: we were particularly fond of a touching encounter in Antarctica #4 between Hope and a polar bear-wearing Logan, one only slightly (okay, completely) undermined by the simple fact that such creatures are not and never have been, found in the South Pole. (Do they still give out No Prizes? Best order some more.)

On the upside, John Romita Jr and Scott Hanna's dynamic, angular art has got better and better with each issue, leaving future pencillers

We remember JMS using that Cyke line in BSI
I'LL BE BACK TO YOU THE MOMENT I'M FREE
BUT YOU HAVE TO STAY FOR ANOTHER DAY
WHERE A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE CREATED TOMORROW EARTH, WE MAY HAVE TO INSERT A BAIT-TO-BOOT
BEAMS...TORCH GET THE GIRL OFF MY ISLAND

They're behind you! Everyone is after Hope...


Wanda: still hot, in a kinda vintage style.


Mar-Vell's back, or so it might seem...

Spidey vs Colossus: mismatched!

> **Simonson's jagged cartooning is a joy**

Oliver Coipel and Adam Kubert with a lot to live up to

FIGHT CLUB

If – as Joe Quesada suggests in this very issue – comic book readers like nothing better than seeing their favourite superheroes squaring up against each other, then *AVX: VS* must be a fanboy's dream come true.

Promoted as placing the emphasis firmly on the action, while self-consciously downplaying any kind of story development, this is a love-it-or-hate-it book.

Certainly, the fights vary in quality hugely. Jason Aaron brings a subtle cerebral element to Iron Man's confrontation with Magneto which leaves you wondering whether modern technology could outpace the Master of Magnetism; Spidey and the newly Juggernaut-enhanced Colossus might seem an uneven contest of David and Goliath proportions, but Kieron Gillen's wry script neatly sidesteps expectations, Steve McNiven's first writing assignment, a Gambit/Cap showdown, provides plenty of scope for his grimacing artwork, and the Thing and Sub-Mariner settle old scores in Kathryn and Stuart Immonen's grudge match.

While some may find it a refreshing change of pace from the man-on-the-street perspective of the *Frontline* spin-offs of previous crossovers *AVX: VS*'s bombastic premise could soon wear thin. Utterly unessential, terrible value for money, hopelessly patchy – but you may have fun.

While most crossovers and their myriad tie-ins are (a legend) designed to make sense even if they're read separately, this seldom proves to be the case. Still, Brian Michael Bendis' latest New Avengers arc could prove a glorious exception to that rule.

Chronicling the emergence of one of Danny Rand's ironic predecessors – who has some inexplicable link to the Phoenix Force – Bendis' enthralling storyline deftly shifts from the past to the present, building on the expanded mythos of K'un Lun, which Ed Brubaker and Matt Fraction established in their *Immortal Iron Fist* series of a few years ago.

Some readers might feel understandably cheated by the complete absence of any actual Avengers – even Danny Rand himself! – but there are intriguing elements here, not least a cameo by one Leonardo Da Vinci that suggests some connections with Jonathan Hickman's *S.H.I.E.L.D.* Enhanced by Mike Deodato's ornate art, this standalone makes excellent reading whether you're following *Avengers Vs X-Men* or not.

LOST IN SPACE

In sharp contrast to the more introspective *New Avengers*, the plain old regular *Avengers* is very closely linked to the central action of *Avengers Vs X-Men* these days, as the likes of Thor, Beast, Captain Britain and Ms Marvel embark upon a suicide space mission to intercept and contain the Phoenix Force.

Pivoting on the apparent treachery of former Marvel Boy Noh-Varr, who now goes by the way less memorable nom de plume Protector, it overlaps confusingly with the similarly cosmic-bound *Secret Avengers*. Representing his first interior work for Marvel in over a decade though, Walt Simonson's jagged cartooning is a joy to behold – and there's an unashamed nostalgia a kick to seeing him draw the Thunder God in full flight so many years after his seminal *Thor* run.

Over in *Secret Avengers* Noh-Varr's fellow Kree Captain Marvel appears to have risen from the grave (once again!) after being imbued with the Phoenix Force. Reduced to a mindless minion, Mar-Vell aligns himself with the equally duplicitous Protector and Ms Marvel, as he turns on his former Avengers colleagues and fights the Kree corner.

Casting doubt on the nature of his resurrection, Rick Remender harks sensitively back to Jim Starlin's classic '80s storyline, which culminated with Mar-Vell dying of cancer, while the glimpse of Thanos will intrigue those who enjoyed *Avengers Assemble*'s closing shot.

In contrast, Kieron Gillen's *Uncanny X-Men* doesn't add any extra layers to the unfolding plot, and instead fills in some of the gaps as it treads more leisurely over familiar territory.

While the smackdowns between the likes of Colossus and Red Hulk and the Thing and Namor echo *AVX: VS*'s no-holds-barred slugfests, Gillen's cheeky explanation of the primal rationale between such testosterone-fuelled confrontations is right on the money – although there's little chance of the Avengers or the X-Men making love, not war over the next six months.

Of course, a sizeable chunk of the Marvel faithful would have it no other way. **Stephen Jewell**

Campbell's inky and suitably 'Shadow' art.

THE SHADOW

WRITER: Garth Ennis
ARTIST: Aaron Campbell
PUBLISHER: Dynamite
OUT: Now
★★★

As confident and competent as ever, Ennis takes a not-quite-superhero – in this case the Shadow – and turns him into his own creature, an ultra-competent, possibly borderline insane player of Kipling-esque pre-World War 2 'Great Games' in the Far East

The Shadow, of course, was a huge influence on many of our darker, more intense comic heroes and has had numerous comic book incarnations over the years. This version reads like a less charming, more violent *Indiana Jones*, full of flying boats, Nazis and Chinese warlords called things like Buffalo Wong (presumably named for the fighter ace, who took on Japanese Zeros in an outmoded crate)

As with many takes on The Shadow, generally ambiguous "friend and companion' Margot Lane – a spunk socialite originally created for the radio series, then bouncing back to the pulps – is our way into the story, for playboy Lamont Cranston (secretly The Shadow, giggling killer with the power to cloud men's minds') is an unknowable 'agent of fate' better seen from the outside

Classic Shadow villains tended to be colour-obsessed – Red Envoy, Grey Fist, Black Dragon, Silver Skull and on and on – but here we're in Ennis hyper-realism, where gunplay on planes takes out the engines and brings them down, chamoagne flutes make a handy stabbing weapon and period events – such as the Nanking Massacre – make for a suitable jumping off point **Matt Bielby**

BATMAN: KNIGHTFALL

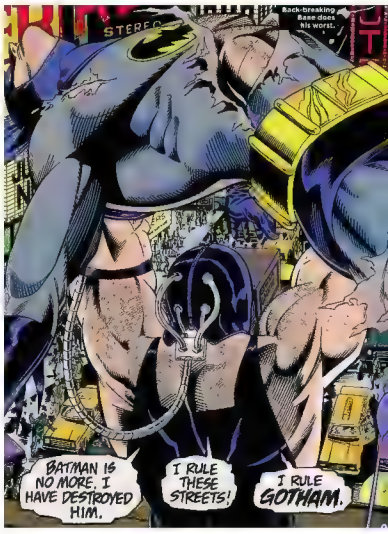
WRITERS: Doug Moench, Chuck Dixon, Alan Grant
ARTISTS: Jim Aparo, Norm Breyfogle, Jim Balent and others
PUBLISHER: DC
OUT: Now
★½

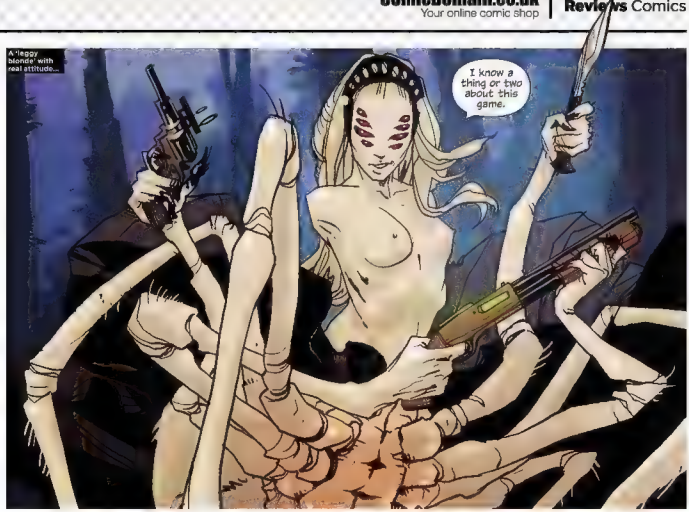
'Knightfall' was a beast running through the *Batman* books and other DC comics for over a year through 1993-4; the first chunk sees new super-bad Bane come to Gotham, tire out the Dark Knight by freeing all his locked-up bad guys, then break his back, allowing psycho fill-in Batman Azrael to take armoured revenge, sequel *Knightquest* is the adventures of loopy old Jean-Paul/Az as the new Batman, adding things like flamethrowers to the Bat-costume, finally, *Knightsend* sees Bruce's return, and a confrontation with his loose cannon replacement

Now, fat volumes tell the complete tale – the first is more than 600 pages long with the famous spine-trauma about halfway through and climaxing with Azrael taking his revenge on Bane – and looking back at it now it's a bizarre thing, full of rough-around-the-edges but undeniably effective moments, but as a whole rambling and impenetrable

Events take place out of sequence (early doors, Robin references a Bane/Killer Croc fight that doesn't actually happen for another 100 pages), random fights with shitty characters like Victor Zsasz and Film Freak get in the way, and art is – frankly – terrible throughout, packed with mullet haircuts, disastrous page layouts (folk like Jim Aparo, so good in the '70s, don't seem to have found a random or confusing bit of storytelling they didn't like) and with backgrounds largely absent for entire sequences

The best bit, strangely, hardly features Batman at all; this is the 64-page one-shot *Batman Vengeance Of Bane* that introduced this Big Bad and kicked the whole thing off. It's similarly pedestrian-looking, but prison tales almost always work, and this origin story doesn't buck the trend, it's the set-up for a potentially energetic tale that never fully emerges, buried under tons of no-hum superheroics and frankly embarrassing angst **Matt Bielby**





SAGA

Like *Star Wars* with magic, and breast milk

WRITER: Brian K Vaughan
ARTIST: Fiona Staples
PUBLISHER: Image Comics
OUT: Now
★★★★★

Brian K Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man* – a 60-issue epic in which all the planet's guys except one suddenly die, and the surviving women are forced to rebuild a surely-doomed world – was one of the most ambitious, successful and human SF comics of the past decade. Now, following two quiet years since both *Y* and his other series, *Ex Machina*, concluded he's back, again with a female artist (every issue of *Y* was drawn by the Canadian Pia Guerra).

This time he's using the up-and-coming Fiona Staples, of Wildstorm series *North 40* and DW's *Mystery Society*, who threatens – on this form – to become the biggest female star in comics, her work here is open, clear, beautifully coloured, nicely loose at times and full of fascinating imaginative touches.

Her Pintrest board references everything from *Final Fantasy* games to Indian bridal headpieces and, indeed, the book sometimes feels a little European, other times Eastern, without being anything other than itself. (Character design is particularly strong, so far we've loved the TV-screen headed folk, the big blue cat and the spider-woman who manages the neat trick of being sexy as hell and utterly revolting, both at once.)

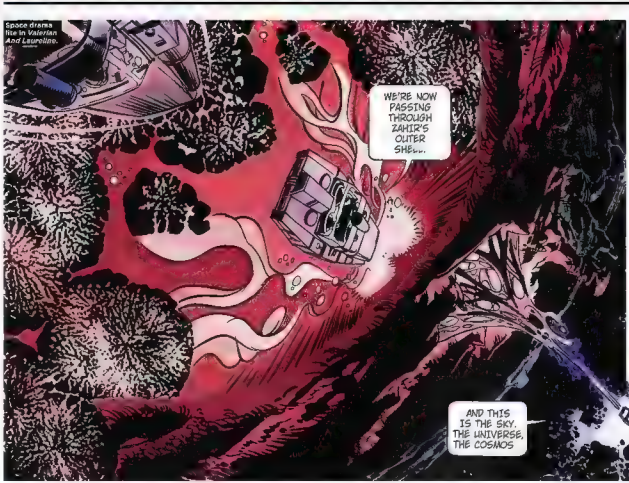
Vaughan's stuff has never before relied upon the voiceover-style narration that seemed so fresh when Frank Miller et al first used it, but now litters so many books with dull, obvious hard-boiled chatter from the protagonist, now he's bringing it into his arsenal, but with a new spin – these captions, the thoughts of a baby presumably remembering her first days, are drawn organically onto the art by Staples in a sort of child's picture

book style, playfully wrapping around the images and otherwise interacting with them. It's charming and effective.

Unlike Vaughan's previous SF outings, *Saga* is a star-spanning space opera in the old style, full of spaceships and strange creatures and weird alien worlds. It's also a tale about early parenthood, made more palatable by all the sci-fi craziness and odd details: the slightly twee, overly right-on qualities that are perhaps his biggest flaw as a writer are still here, but thankfully buried way down in the mix.

We're in a *Star Wars*-esque space and a mismatched young couple – Marko of Wreath has goat ears and ram's horns, Alana from the more powerful Landfall has insect wings – are on the run with their tiny daughter Hazel, meanwhile an ongoing interplanetary war between their two peoples, his magical and hers scientific, rages. Amongst those on their tail are freelance bounty hunter The Will, a shaven-headed Han Solo (right down to his striped military pants) and his giant, Chewie-esque talking moggy.

There's nudity, violence, swearing, sex (between two of the TV-heads!) and – by current comic standards – a lot of bang for your buck; at least 22 pages of story per issue (the first had far more) on good paper, at $2.99 a pop. This might just be the best new comic of the year. **Matt Bielby**


Space drama lite in Valerian And Laureline.
WE'RE NOW PASSING THROUGH ZAHIR'S OUTER SHELL...
AND THIS IS THE SKY, THE UNIVERSE, THE COSMOS

CINEBOOK ROUND-UP

Fancy comics of a different flavour? Then why not try 'The 9th Art Publisher'...?

LUCKY LUKE: THE DALTONS, ALWAYS ON THE RUN

WRITER: René Goscinny
ARTIST: Morris
PUBLISHER: Cinebook
OUT: Now
★★★

SPOOKS: THE FALL OF BABYLON

WRITERS: Xavier Dorison & Fabien Nury
ARTIST: Christian Rossi
PUBLISHER: Cinebook
OUT: Now
★★★★★

LARGO WINCH: THE LAW OF THE DOLLAR

WRITER: Jean Van Hamme
ARTIST: Philippe Francq
PUBLISHER: Cinebook
OUT: Now
★★½

VALERIAN AND LAURELINE: THE LAND WITHOUT STARS

Writer: Pierre Christin
Artist: Jean-Claude Mézières
Publisher: Cinebook
Out: Now
★★½

Bored with American comics? The Cinebook line-up – French-style graphic albums of about 48 or 56 pages, at magazine size or a little smaller, priced at six or seven quid a throw – are well worth a try. Some are classics of the bandes dessinées genre; others recent hits, but the range of subject matter is vast and the quality generally high.

Hugely popular across much of Europe, and translated into 30 or so languages, *Lucky Luke* is the third of the true Franco-Belgian comic book giants. It tells of the wandering adventures of a laidback cowboy – think a young Jimmy Stewart, a roll-up ever-present between lazy lips – righting wrongs in the Old West. Third because his success, though stellar, has never matched that of *Asterix* or *Tintin* in the English-speaking world – perhaps the Western setting is too 'samey', or maybe Anglo-Saxons have just fallen too far out of love with the oater.

Created in 1946 by Belgian cartoonist Maurice De Bevere, otherwise known as Morris, the strip's golden age ran from 1957 to the mid '80s when *Asterix* co-creator René Goscinny contributed dialogue and plot. It's these stories that Cinebooks are currently working their way through, though in a rather eccentric order. (Not that it matters much – few *Lucky Luke* tales are set in a specific year and, in reality, the historical characters that crop up operated dozens of years apart.)

Asterix fans will recognise how much the comedy relies on ethnic stereotypes – whiskey-swigging Apaches, lazy Mexicans – but Luke (despite shooting 'faster than his shadow', he never kills anyone) is scrupulously fair to everyone. *The Daltons, Always On The Run* comes from 1964, and features four idiot Luke in many of the tales. Except for their heights they look identical, the smallest scheming and angry, the tallest dumb as a rock. As always, Luke is helped by Jolly Jumper, the 'smartest horse in the world', and hindered by a dopey hound, Rin Tin Can, who deserves his own strip. It's likeable stuff, rarely spectacular but surprisingly more-ish, the sort of affectionate parody you can't help but feel warmly about.

> **The dopey hound deserves his own strip**

DEMON HUNTERS

Stronger, though, is *SPOOKS*, a genuinely impressive adventure set at the start of the 20th century in a beautifully rendered period New York. *The Untouchables*, *Once Upon A Time In America* and *Gangs Of New York* all spring to mind as a small group of cowboys and early G-Men are recruited to battle a possibly demonic evil that holds sway over many of the young nation's great and good through a

MON DIEU! WHAT HAPPENED?
LET ME SEE!
CALL FOR HELP!
GET OUT OF THE WAY, DAMMIT! I'M A POLICEMAN!
SO WHAT? YOU GONNA ARREST THIS TRAIN?!
FIND STUDWATER! HURRY!
SPOOKY stuff in a gangster Big Apple

Hellfire Club-style secret cabal. Beautifully drawn in that tight European way, it takes us to lavish society parties and Wild West saloons, Heli's Kitchen opium dens and cathedral-like gentlemen's clubs. Our heroes and their opponents are all well-drawn and intriguing too, with spunky runaway society miss Kathryn Lennox a potential standout.

Claustrophobic and intriguing, the 54 pages in the first volume could easily be spun out into a six-issue miniseries for American comics. *SPOOKS* stands for 'SPecialists in the Odd and Occult', by the way, renamed from the original French title *W.E.S.T.* (Weird Enforcement Special Team) for no clear reason.

The *Largo Winch* stories are unlike anything in American comics, a rolling action adventure/soap opera focus ng on boardroom machinations. Think the result of a three-way love-tryst between *Hart To Hart*, *Dallas* and *The Bourne Identity*. A good-looking, capable rogue in maybe his late

> **“Largo is a Euro take on an American tough guy”**

twenties, Largo is a Euro-take on an American tough guy: he loves the chicks, he hates settling down, he is good with his fists, he's anti-establishment by nature – and he's just inherited a vast business empire worth many billions. Helped by a small gang of old buddies and hot female employees, he globetrots, righting wrongs he now feels responsible for, often with the police in hot pursuit, convinced he killed this guy or that. *The Law Of The Dollar* is Cornelooks' tenth volume of this stuff.

Though the backstory (most of it in the preceding book, *The Price Of Money* – *Largo* volumes come in match ng pairs, one putting our hero in trouble, the next getting him out of it), can be picked up fairly sharply, it is complicated – a ski-mak ng company Largo has interests in has been run into the ground for seemingly no reason, and soon our boy's following the money trail, making escapes by helicopter, indulging in car chases and knife fights, and (it has to be said) enjoying relationships with women I thought had gone out with Roger Moore's 007.

Artist Philippe Francq is great with vehicles and buildings, but slightly retro in his hairstyles and clothes, this volume was first published in 2005 but occasionally it feels more like 1985. Some of the business talk bogs things down but, bas.cally, good fun.

GALAXITY RANGERS

Finally, the hugely influential, hugely popular (in France) *Valerian And Laureline*: a teenage-looking boy/girl pairing of agents for Galaxity (read: Earth), flipping through space and time in light comedy adventures – think *Barbarella* without much sex.

Their relationship (at least in this volume – others tell a different tale) seems more brother/sister than that of lovers, and while this volume begins with some very broad stuff about flying a spaceship while drunk we're soon inside a hollow planet where warring civilisations are split along gender lines, one is all-female but ruled by a small number of men the other its opposite. It bounces along in its surprisingly childlike way – few space despots, with the lithe Laureline hiding out in their harem, would do nothing but read her poetry – and makes little attempt to satirise the male/female divide with any punch.

It's pleasing, though, that these adventures always seem to end with our heroes persuading the aliens they meet to change. *Doctor Who*-style, rather than forcing it upon them, it's also fun to note (this adventure was first published in 1972) that Laureline's slave-girl outfit may well have been the direct model for a certain Princess Leia's. **Matt Bielby**

THE RAINBOW ORCHID VOLUME 3

WRITER: Garen Ewing
ARTIST: Garen Ewing
PUBLISHER: Egmont
OUT: Now
★★★★½

Ewing's first Julius Chancer series romps home in fine form. The quest for the possibly mythical Rainbow Orchid has taken the team of historical researcher Julius, film star Lily and her agent Nathaniel Crumpole from Europe to the Hindu Kush, with baddies Evelyn Crow and her sidekick heavy Box close behind, doing their best to sabotage the mission.

Meanwhile back in England investigative journalist William Pickle is being held captive by the Order of the Black Lion, a secret society whose leader, megalomaniac businessman Urkaz Grope, is set to steal the title and lands of his rival, Lord Reginald Lawrence, by beating him in the Wembley Orchid Competition.

Unexpectedly, the story takes a turn for the science-fictional in this volume, straying into *Chanots Of The Gods* territory. Ewing makes the twist work, however, and the only criticism we might have of the book is that it ends on an unresolved and somewhat downbeat note. On the bright side, at least the dangling plot threads augur further adventures.

The Rainbow Orchid may replicate the tone and style of the 'Brussels school' and its master craftsmen Hergé, Bob de Moor and Edgar P Jacobs, but it's more than mere nostalgic period piece or loving Ligne claire pastiche. Ewing has produced a classic, an all-ages comic that transcends its origins and boasts a humour and flavour distinctly its own. **James Lovegrove**

SEVERED

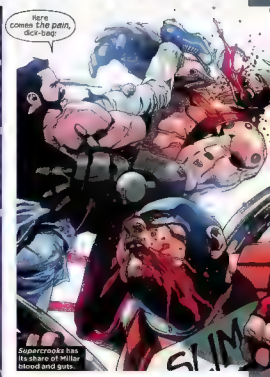
WRITERS: Scott Snyder and Scott Tuft
ARTIST: Attila Futaki
PUBLISHER: Image
OUT: Now
★★★½

Snyder wrote the first arc of his Eisner Award-winning *American Vampire* in collaboration with Stephen King, and there's a kingly feel to *Severed* too. The basic narrative technique of an old man recounting a terrifying episode from his childhood is a trick King has used more than once, and the monster at the heart of the story – someone who appears normal, friendly, even charismatic, but harbours a secret evil side as old as time – could have stepped out from the pages of one of the Maine master of the macabre's many novels. That said, *Severed* stands on its own two feet as an effective, unnerving slice of horror fiction.

In the '50s, Jack Garron looks back to when he was 12 and ran away from home after having discovered that he was adopted. Searching for his father, an itinerant musician young Jack finds that life on the road is hardly the carefree, romantic idyll he dreamed it would be – a real sabot brought frighteningly home when he becomes the target of a cannibalistic serial killer who feeds not just on youngsters' flesh, but on their hopes.

The story is told well by Snyder and his collaborator Tuft, a Hollywood screenwriter. If there's one thing that prevents *Severed* from being truly great, it's the artwork by Hungary's Attila Futaki. Individual panels look terrific, in a sinewy, Bernie Wrightson-esque way, but the storytelling is sometimes off and facial expressions don't always match up too well with the dialogue. **James Lovegrove**

Hoodies and ski chases: a potent brew.



MILLARWORLD ROUND-UP

Seems Marvel's creator-owned Icon imprint has been pretty much co-opted these days ..

THE SECRET SERVICE
WRITER: Mark Millar
ARTIST: Dave Gibbons
PUBLISHER: Icon (Marvel)
OUT: Now
★★★★

SUPERCROOKS
WRITER: Mark Millar
ARTIST: Leinil Yu
PUBLISHER: Icon (Marvel)
OUT: Now
★★★

The Mark Millar high-concept superhero machine continues apace: smart and smart-arse in approximately equal measure, each new concept begging to be turned into a medium/high-budget action flick, you can imagine either of these two as a late spring release perfectly timed for the start of blockbuster season. Both, as Millar excels at, are familiar concepts given a wicked, cynical twist.

First up, *The Secret Service*, with clear, crisp Dave Gibbons art, nothing as tight as *Watchmen*, but more like his easy-reading *Martha Washington* style with four or five panels per page.

On the surface it's another take on *Wanted*, with Joe Average here a spotty, crop-haired hoody on a Peckham estate, nicking cars and drinking on corners – granted a chance at a better life and grabbing it with both hands.

This time, though, it's not as a superv llain but through 007-style spy antics; Gary's Uncle Jack turns out to be Her Majesty's best, and pulls a few strings to get him a try-out at Hereford superspy school.

There's p enty of v olence and sneaky jokes, often n the same pane – w tness a *The Spy Who Loved Me* ski-jump escape go horribly wrong, and 100 new husbands and wives at a mass-wedding turn on each other with broken bottles and cake knives – while the dialogue snaps. ("We're going to spend the next six months covering the second G-Spot alone," Gary is told, hey, it makes sense that wannabe Bonds would be tra ned in guaranteed orgasm techn ques.) Good taste is circumnavigated with a smirk – fine – but the editor's hand seems kinda light. (Hereford is both next to the sea and easily access ble from Covent Garden, s it? Hmm.)

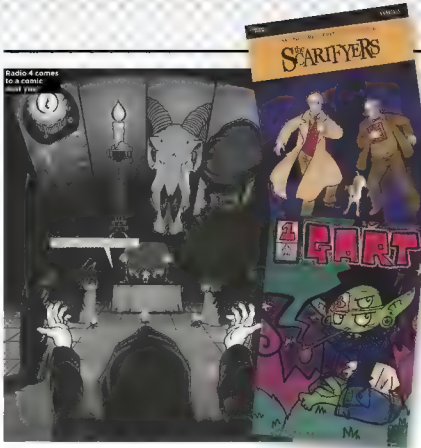
Still, it's a good, confident ride, may turn out to be a great one.

> **"Smart and smart-arse in about equal measure"**

Supercrooks, meanwhile channe s *Ocean's Eleven*-style heist films, but w th a superhero twist, with America too hot for them – "there's five superheroes to every super crim nal out there," says one guy, mak ng this Universe the exact opposite of every other in com cs – our Charlie Croker-type gathers his team and high-tails it to Spa n. There, superpowers are banned, and the pickings seem rich.

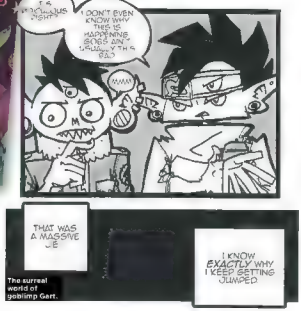
Working with Le nil Yu, Mi lar's Filipino *Superior* collaborator, the result is flash er but less spec al than *SS*, undeniably handsome but more l ke mainstream Marvel or DC – though again w th the brill ant why-didn't-I-think-of-that? h gh concept, and a generous help ng of the snarky chat.

Where *Supercrooks* feels light, at least for Millar, is on the shocks and surprises; it's been perfectly enterta ning so far, and things are brewing, but (beyond the predictable swearing and ultra-violence) rugs have been left firmly under feet. As with *The Secret Service*, and many a Millar tale, we enjoy the set-pieces, the machinations and the general scampy tone, but fail to care very much about any of the characters – we're simply not g ven enough about them that's unique or sympathetic for that. **Matt Blelby**



SMALL PRESS ROUND-UP

Because all the best things come in little packages. Quite literally, in this instance...


YOU WHAT?
THAT'S LIKE, 14 TIMES THIS WEEK
AND IT'S ONLY TUESDAY!
SLURP SLURP MMMMM
I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHY THIS IS HAPPENING SINCE ONLY ONCE A YEAR
MMM
THAT WAS A MASSIVE LIE
I KNOW EXACTLY WHY I KEEP GETTING JUMPED

The surreal world of goblimp Gart.

THE SCARIFYERS
WRITER: Simon Barnard
ARTIST: Simon Gurr
OUT: Now
★★★★

GART
WRITER & ARTIST: Anaseed Man
OUT: Now
★★★½

SIOUX WARRIOR
WRITER: Sam Gardner Jr
ARTIST: Jake Rowlinson
OUT: Now
★★★★½

THE SIXPENNY MURDER
WRITER: John A Short
ARTIST: David Hitchcock
OUT: Now
★★★★★

BAYOU ARCANA: SONGS OF LOSS AND REDEMPTION
EDITOR: Jimmy Pearson
OUT: Now
★★★½

The Scarifyers (bit.ly/scarifyers) couldn't be more English if it tried. Beginning life as an audio series on the most venerable of British institutions, Radio 4, it's now been adapted for comics – and it's an awful lot of jolly good fun.

Featuring the exploits of Inspector Lionheart – the Met's longest serving officer (he's 74, or possibly 76) – as he runs around London attempting to foil a dastardly supernatural plot, there's a lot here to enjoy.

With multiple murders of a mysterious nature, sinister Russian clowns, pistols at dawn and, of course, plenty of tea, it's every bit the ripping yarn it sets itself up as.

Gurr's artwork is precise, atmospheric and laced with incidental humour (like the policeman excavating a nostril with his pencil), and the plot races along at a frantic pace.

Witty, laced with intrigue and with exceptional production values, it's the perfect accompaniment to a cup of char and a biccy.

You won't find much in the way of refined English gentlemen in *Gart* (bit.ly/gartcomix). Half goblin, half imp (a goblimp, in the parlance of his people), Gart is a tiny green bundle of three-eyed mayhem, forever having to ward off goblins who are intent on showing him who's boss. They largely fail though, because Gart has 'mad skills', you see.

Issue one finds him demonstrating said skills on various heavies, before ganging up with a bizarre-looking creation to take down the king of the goblins.

Created by the enigmatic, yet brilliantly named Anaseed Man, Gart's striking artwork and way with a gag make for a lot of irreverent laughs, and there's an anarchic flavour at play here that's hard not to love. With a breathless urgency to the story and some great incidental detail in the pencils, the whole thing pulses with surly teenage energy.

You've got to hand it to the folks at Cape Fear Comics (bit.ly/capefear) – they've certainly got an eye for the promotional gimmick. Issue one of their latest title *Sioux Warrior* came with a music box that played along with the comic as you read it, and now issue two – the 'buckle up edition' – comes with its very own superhero kit.

There's a cutout mask and a rather dashing utility belt, which includes a cape, some elastic for

Sioux Warrior comic or costume?

Violent street gangs are nothing new.

Bayou Arcana not afraid of the big issues

❝ A comic that should be handed out in schools ❞

the mask and, of course, a comic. There's been a lot of effort put in here, and that alone grabs *Sioux Warrior* a few stars the enterprising team behind it clearly willing to go the extra mile to catch the eye of punters.

The comic itself is tiny, though, (they had to fit it in the utility belt, after all) and as a result feels like the least important part of the package. As an exercise in swiftly sketched out storytelling it's pretty accomplished the mysterious Sioux Warrior's secret hideout is being searched for, and the pencils are vibrant and convey everything easily enough, even on the small pages. Top marks for effort, and we're sure to be seeing more innovative ideas from these guys.

A lot of thought has also gone into *The Sixpenny Murder* (bit.ly/sixpennymurder), a large format eight-page story from Kult Creations, albeit in a different way.

The story of a savage 19th century killing, it was produced as part of the Changing Places programme, designed to give young people a fresh perspective on personal responsibility and pull them away from gang-related violence and knife crime.

It's a stark, interesting piece that examines thoughtless violence, the victimisation of youth and the consequences of poorly thought out actions, and is all the more impressive for its condensed storytelling techniques.

The evocative pencils, combined with the fact that *The Sixpenny Murder* actually has something to say, makes this a comic that should be handed out in schools.

If you've ever fancied taking a trip into the dark heart of the southern American swamps, then *Bayou Arcana* (bit.ly/bayouarcana), an anthology from those lovely folks at AAM/Markosia, is for you, although it'll probably put you off any notions of sightseeing.

Based around a grand concept to create a new universe for various writer/artist teams to run riot in, the result – a wildly varied set of stories revolving around a heavenly settlement established by ex-slaves in an eerie supernatural swamp – is a hell of a ride.

Addressing issues of race, personal demons, salvation and devastation, stories like Matthew Craig and Dani Abram's 'Small World' and Jimmy Pearson and Valia Kapadai's 'The Tale Of Ol' Mercy' are packed with great ideas that more often than not pack a sting in the tale.

Artistic styles jostle for space as ideas flower into being in front of your eyes, making *Bayou Arcana* a journey into the unknown that is well worth taking. **Rob Power**

SMALL PRESSERS! **Send your work to:** Rob Power, Comic Heroes, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW, or alternatively send links to **rob.power@futurenet.com**

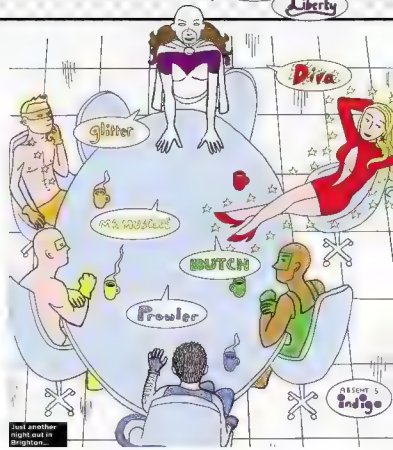
SPANDEX: FAST AND HARD

WRITER/ARTIST: Martin Eden
PUBLISHER: Titan Books
OUT: Now
★★★★

Spandex will not be for everyone – some, perhaps, will balk at gay superheroes others at the naïve qualities of Martin Eden's art – but more fool them, we say. This is quality, highly entertaining stuff: fast-moving, beautifully judged, blending superheroics at their most fun with gleeful camp and some serious politics, then coating the lot in a shower of glitter. In *Spandex*'s universe the epicentre of superpowered activity isn't New York or Gotham but high-sexy Brighton, with its nightclubs and beach, lesbian supervillains and transvestite crime-fighters.

Where *Spandex* really scores is in how seamlessly it blends invention – part Paul Grist, part Jack Kirby: it throws pink ninjas and 50-foot dykes about with (yes!) gay abandon – with its soap opera machinations; in all but sexuality this is the spiritual successor to early Marvel Comics, with private lives and professional scraps a hot mess even Peter Parker would describe as 'tangled'.

Fast And Hard contains the first three self-published issues – Spandex travel to Japan, fall foul of arch-enemies Les Girls and (most impressively) battle a Dementor-like space villain who's already taken over the world – plus some bright, fun bonus material (we especially like *Bear Man & Twinkle*). All-in-all, reassuringly familiar and daringly different both at once; we look forward to further collections. **Matt Bielby**



Just another night out in Brighton...

Flex Mentallo: a fine figure of a man

FLEX MENTALLO, MAN OF MUSCLE MYSTERY

WRITER: Grant Morrison
ARTIST: Frank Quitely
PUBLISHER: DC Vertigo
OUT: Now
★★★★★

Morrison and Quitely's mid-'90s miniseries has long been overdue reissue as a collection. Charles Atlas Ltd brought a lawsuit against DC in 2000, claiming that Flex's origin infringed copyright on its bodybuilding adverts. Although the case was thrown out, one can imagine that the publisher has been somewhat skittish about the comic ever since.

Nonetheless, here it is at last between hardcovers, deservedly. First seen in the pages of *Doom Patrol*, Flex is a muscleboundgood guy, dressed in boots and circus strongman-style leopard-print shorts. He's hunting for a lost teammate, The Fact, who's gone missing. But could Flex's entire existence simply be the fevered imaginings of a failed Scottish rock music an who's dying of a self-inflicted drug overdose?

As usual when Morrison is in full mind-bendy mode, clear-cut answers are in short supply but it's a hell of a lot of fun even just figuring out what the questions are. Flex's world is a benighted doom-ridden place littered with

> **"A long overdue reissue"**

glimpses of the detritus of a lost superheroic Golden Age; yet the overall message is positive, a great ecstatic gut-cry of transformation and optimism.

Of Quitely's art, little needs to be said except that it's as dazzlingly assured in detail and composition as ever and enhanced by a brand new colouring job. Indispensable. **James Lovegrove**

Enemies: both good fun and educational.

SELF MADE HERO ROUND-UP

Runaway lunatics, psychoanalysis and 4,000 years of history...

THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD
WRITER: HP Lovecraft
ARTIST: INJ Culbard
OUT: Now
★★★★

THE WOLF MAN
WRITER: Richard Appignanesi
ARTIST: Slawa Harasymowicz
OUT: Now
★★★

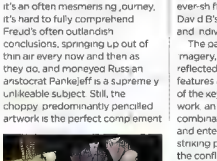
BEST OF ENEMIES: A HISTORY OF US AND MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS
WRITER: Jean-Pierre Filiu
ARTIST: David B
OUT: Now
★★★★½

Self Made Hero really, *really* likes HP Lovecraft. And why not? Many of the master of the macabre's stories make for mighty fine comics and you need look no further than its two Lovecraft anthologies for proof. *The Case Of Charles Dexter Ward* is classic Lovecraft, a brooding mixture of closed room mystery and ethereal horror that hooks you in from the first panel.

When the eponymous Ward disappears from a mental institution, the authorities attempt to uncover how he did it and where he's gotten to. Their investigation uncovers a dark tale of obsession, forbidden knowledge and alchemy that stretches back hundreds of years. Culbard's bold, confident linework and cinematic pacing are the perfect complement to this forboding fable: the unseen horrors and archaic terrors lurking just off panel, on every page.

The Wolf Man is altogether less concerned with the horrifying mysteries of the ages, instead telling the tale of one of Sigmund Freud's most famous and enduring cases. Detailing the story of Sergei Pankejeff and his many years of psychoanalysis, *The Wolf Man* is a case study of neurosis, childhood trauma and bizarre sexual repression, all wrapped up in a narrative that stretches from 1910 to the late '70s.

The central theme is Pankejeff, the so-called Wolf Man, his strange dreams and depressive compulsions and Freud's attempts to unwrap them. While it's an often mesmerising journey, it's hard to fully comprehend Freud's often outlandish conclusions, springing up out of thin air every now and then as they do, and moneyed Russian aristocrat Pankejeff is a supremely unlikeable subject. Still, the choppy, predominantly pencilled artwork is the perfect complement to the subject matter, a trippy journey through the subconscious of the early 20th century.



There's more history to be had in *Best Of Enemies*, the story of the troubled relationship between the US and the Middle East from Parisian scholar Jean-Pierre Filiu and Eisner Award-winning graphic novelist David B. An ambitious project that begins with the story of Gilgamesh more than 4,000 years ago and finishes in the midst of the Cold War, it's nevertheless an energetic and utterly beguiling read.

The success of the book lies in the perfect synergy between Filiu's professorial grip on the intricacies of the complicated ever-shifting subject matter and David B's gorgeous, hallucinogenic and individual artwork.

The pages seethe with striking imagery, the twisting narrative reflected in the exaggerated features and grotesque caricatures of the key players. It's a thoughtful work, an intellectually stimulating combination of education, analysis and entertainment that has some striking parallels to draw between the conflicts that have plagued the region over the past decade and the fractious historical precedents that have seemingly been forgotten. As *Best Of Enemies* is only the first part of the story, it'll be fascinating to see what conclusions are drawn in part two.

Rob Power

ABSALOM: GHOSTS OF LONDON

Hellboy meets The Sweeney...

WRITER: Gordon Rennie
ARTIST: Tiernen Trevallion
PUBLISHER: Rebellion
OUT: 21 June
★★★☆

2000 AD would seem to have something of an urban fantasy hit on its hands with *Absalom*, a cops-vs-demons underworld romp that channels Guy Ritchie, Gene Hunt and Clive Barker – amongst others – in a moody, monochrome chase around London's backstreets; like so many of the best 'Galaxy's Greatest' strips, it wears its influences on its sleeve.

Gordon Rennie is a confident storyteller – he's been handling similar material in sister-strip *Caballistics, Inc* for a decade or so now – but it's artist Tiernen Trevallion who really impresses here, his monsters dramatic and inventive and his cars and street furniture a beautiful blend of the realistic and the cartoon. What may seem a hackneyed subject matter is raised above the norm by the level of craft on display and the general high levels of energy throughout; the only real downside is that nobody here is very likeable and there are times when you start to forget to care.

Absalom himself is a grumpy old sod, we learn so little about his helpers they're never more than ciphers – and everyone else is a devious monster. By the next day I'd completely forgotten what actually *happened*, though I'd enjoyed it at the time. **Matt Bielby**

SIX GUNS

WRITER: Andy Diggle
ARTIST: Davide Gianfelice
PUBLISHER: Marvel
OUT: Now
★★★★☆

Tex Dawson. Matt Slade. Black Rider. Two-Gun Kid. They're Marvel Western heroes, some of them dating as far as back as the Timely era. For *Six Guns*, Andy Diggle has kept the names and jettisoned everything else. He's also thrown a contemporary character into the mix: Tarantula, from the 2006 pre-Abnett/Lanning incarnation of *Heroes For Hire*.

What we have here is a modern-day Western set firmly in Earth-616 continuity. It opens with Texas Ranger Tex Dawson bringing in Maria Vasquez, aka Tarantula, on charges of murder. She escapes and hightails it to South America. Dawson follows and soon the two have forged an uneasy alliance with the renegade biker known as Black Rider, bounty hunter Matt Slade, and a Mexican youngster out for revenge for the killing of his brother. All five have got on the wrong side of the Roxxon Corporation, which has designs on a vibranium mine in the jungle.

Bullets fly. Briefcases full of money explode. Armoured personnel carriers hurtle over cliffs. Someone even kills a cargo plane with a car. The fluid, spectacular art by Davide Gianfelice – Diggle's collaborator on *Daredevil: Reborn* – hits the action-movie beats bang-on.

> **❝ Bullets fly. Briefcases full of money explode ❞**

Purists may frown on this sort of reimagining, feeling that it devalues the original characters. But when it's done with such brio and aplomb, who can complain? **James Lovegrove**

Classic Marvel gunslingers reunited.

COMIC HEROES

NEXT ISSUE

The Killer Elite

Logan, Joe and the homicidal heroes: why violence is golden, and good guys so often finish last...

FEATURING!

- Wolverine
- Dredd movie
- Punisher
- Conan
- and the grisliest, goriest moments in comics...

(Amazingly, by no means all are EC!)

The blood-splattered, morally questionable Comic Heroes issue 14, on sale 24 August

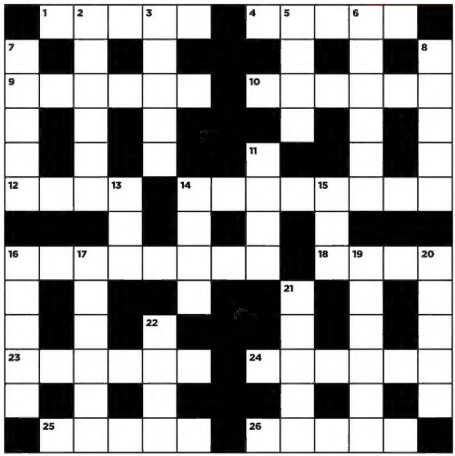
www.comicheroesmagazine.com • www.facebook.com/comicheroes • twitter.com/comicheroesmag

Hunt the Dark Knight

THE COMIC HEROES CROSSWORD

The Caped Crusader, his chums and competitors cavort through every clue...

In this issue we're all over Batman: every answer has something to do with the Darknight Detective, in all his eras and incarnations. And some of the clues here are truly Riddler-esque...



ACROSS

1 _____ Wayne, billionaire playboy alter ego of Batman (5)
4 Gotham City gangster who always appears to be half asleep (5, two words)
9 Gotham-based superhero, the 'Tatterdemalion of Justice', whose enchanted costume can absorb souls (6)
10 Russian henchman of the Joker in the *Batman: Arkham City* videogame, usually partnered with his twin brother Sickle (6)
12 *Kiss From A* _____, song on the *Batman Forever* movie soundtrack, performed by Seal (4)
14 Crossbow-toting Gotham City vigilante, whose civilian identity is mobster's daughter Helena Bertinelli (8)
16 Spectral nickname briefly taken by Michael Lane, who went on to adopt the mask and flaming sword of 19 down (8, hyphenated)
18 Tim _____, artist on *The Long Halloween* and *Dark Victory* (4)
23 Feline-themed arch-foe of Batman, real name Thomas Blake (6)
24 Bat-villain who uses a gem that creates illusions (6)
25 _____ Miles O'Hara, bumbling 'Oirish' policeman in the '60s Batman TV series, played by Stafford Repp (5)
26 The Batman _____, ring-bound 'museum in a book' full of collectibles and repro memorabilia (5)

DOWN

2 Marshall _____, Bat-artist famed for an acclaimed '80s run on Detective Comics in collaboration with writer Steve Englehart (6)
3 Professor Jonathan _____, better known as the fear-gas-wielding Scarecrow (5)
5 The _____ Home, 2010 series of one-shots dealing with the effects of Batman's return from seeming death (4)
6 Pallid-skinned knife-throwing baddie, one of Bane's three criminal lieutenants alongside Trogg and Bird (6)
7 The _____ of St Dumas, the secret society responsible for the creation of 'avenging angel' 19 Down (5)
8 Henchman of Maxie Zeus, a member of the New Olympians who has the power to see over great distances (5)
11 The Major Crimes _____, a division of the Gotham City Police Department, led by Captain Maggie Sawyer (4)
13 ____head, follically challenged villain in the '60s Batman TV series, played by Vincent Price (3)
14 Red _____, an alias of both the Joker and ex-Robin Jason Todd (4)
15 ____ al Ghul, the near-immortal arch-nemesis also known as the Demon's Head (3)
16 _____ Mask, Gotham crime lord (5)
17 Small-time crook and underworld informant in *Batman: The Animated Series* (6)
19 One-time superheroic alias of Jean Paul Valley, who took over the Bat-mantle after Bane broke Batman's spine (6)
20 Detective Sergeant Sarah _____, Commissioner Gordon's second wife, slain by the Joker (5)
21 Lady _____, martial artist and assassin who has helped train both Batman and Batgirl (5)
22 Bob _____, Batman creator, or maybe Kathy, the original Batwoman, or indeed Kate, the new Batwoman (4)

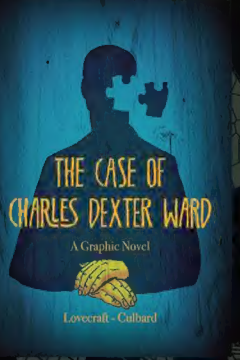
The Long Halloween, drawn by Tim _____?

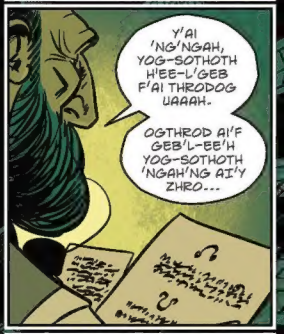
Across 1 Bruce 4 Ivy-Zizz 9 Ragman 10 Hammer 12 Rose 14 Huntress 16 Batwoman 18 Sale 22 Clarion 24 Penguin 25 Chief 26 Vault
Down 2 Rogers 3 Crane 5 Road 6 Zombie 7 Order 8 Argus 11 Unit 13 Egg 14 Hood 15 Ra's 16 Black 17 Twitch 19 Azrael 20 Eason 21 Silva 22 Kane

THE CASE OF CHARLES DEXTER WARD

Lovecraft - Culbard

"I say to you again...do not call up any that you can not put down."





Providence, Rhode Island, 1928. A dangerous inmate disappears from a private hospital for the insane, his method of escape baffling the authorities. Only the patient's final visitor, family physician Dr. Marinus Bicknell Willett holds the key to unlocking The Case of Charles Dexter Ward.

SELF MADE HERO

OUT NOW

9781906838355